

# AMIGO

*Aransas & Matagorda Island Guardian/Orator*  
Spring 2009, Volume 11, Number 2

## Whooping Cranes Face Challenging Times

### Update from the Whooping Crane Wintering Grounds at Aransas

by Tom Stehn, Whooping Crane Coordinator, USFWS

This has been my most frustrating winter at Aransas. The whooping cranes are using unusual locations and are moving to uplands and water holes so frequently that I have been unable to get an accurate count of the population. My best estimate is that 232 adults and 38 juveniles = a record 270 made it to Aransas, surpassing last year's 266. The excellent production coming from Canada that included one pair with two chicks is cause for celebration, but the total numbers are a disappointment. Thirty-eight juveniles added to the population of 266 could have resulted in 304 whooping cranes arriving at Aransas. If 270 is a reasonable estimate of what did arrive, it means 34 whooping cranes, or 12.8% of the flock, died between spring and fall, 2008.



The news just gets worse. The whooping cranes faced difficult conditions when they returned to Aransas in the fall of 2008. Their natural marsh foods were at low levels due to the prolonged drought. Blue crabs were present initially, (an important food source for whooping cranes that make up 80-90% of their diet when available), but crab numbers dropped off through November. Blue crabs were scarce throughout December and January as tides were lowered by low pressure systems and most of the remaining crabs moved out into the deeper bays. Although this is a typical winter pattern, the fall wolfberry crop was very low, a food that the cranes normally rely on heavily. Thus, the cranes were ill-prepared to face the scarcity of crabs. In addition, marsh salinities have remained above the threshold of 21 parts per thousand that forces cranes to seek out fresh water to drink. Although other winters have been "bad", these extreme conditions have not been documented at Aransas NWR in the last 26 years.

Lowered food reserves affect whooping cranes in two main ways; direct mortality and lowered future productivity. So far this winter, 12 whooping cranes are believed to have died (3 carcasses were recovered; the two that were necropsied were emaciated), whereas an average winter has only 0 or 1 crane death. As a double whammy, research done by Dr. Felipe Chavez-Ramirez in 1994 documented that up to 37% of the whooping cranes failed to nest following a poor blue crab winter at Aransas NWR. Observations by Dr. Chavez who visited Aransas for a week in February indicated that the current food scarcity was even more severe than the one he had documented in the 1994-95 winter.

The whooping cranes are being seen in unusual places this winter. Many have left the salt marsh and are feeding on uplands. Three cranes foraged daily in the farm fields north of the refuge through mid-February. A record 21 whooping cranes are wintering on the Lamar Peninsula utilizing game feeders in locations where we have never seen cranes before.

Four juveniles have separated from their parents. Two of these separations occurred at Aransas with the juvenile spending a week foraging along a refuge roadside and was approached closely by the public, most unusual behavior. In the fall, one juvenile spent a couple months in the farm fields just a few miles north of Aransas. A third juvenile separated from its parents and was seen in southern Nebraska through early December. When its roost pond froze, it continued the migration to Oklahoma. After its roost pond froze on January 25<sup>th</sup>, it again continued on its way. The location of all three of these juveniles is currently unknown. The fourth juvenile at Aransas that separated from its parents was apparently killed by an alligator on February 12<sup>th</sup>, though I'm convinced that illness and/or starvation were the primary factors responsible for the death. As of press time, our whooping cranes deaths this year are up 18. For more information go [www.friendsofaransas.org](http://www.friendsofaransas.org).

Due to the food shortages, the unusual distribution of cranes observed, and the two emaciated crane carcasses recovered, supplemental feeding of whooping cranes with corn on the Aransas / Matagorda Island NWR Complex has been initiated and will be continued for at least 1 month. Prescribed burns have also been conducted to provide additional foraging opportunities. We hope these management actions will give the cranes a necessary boost to get them through the winter and hopefully forestall problems with production in 2009 in Canada.

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## FAMI Assists With Crane Feeder Construction



By Charla Marsh



On January 21<sup>st</sup> FAMI members/volunteers Juanita & CL Davidson, Charla & Carroll Marsh, Paulette & Joe Weldin, Larry Tisdell and Cindi Barrett gathered at the biology building on the Refuge to complete the assembly of 21 automatic feeders that had been started on January 20<sup>th</sup> by Refuge staff and volunteers. Some of the FAMI volunteers then assisted the Refuge staff in the installation of the feeders which were placed in open areas where Whooping Cranes had been observed from the ground and in aerial surveys.

Low water levels and increased salinity levels due to current drought conditions have had a significant effect on the Whooping Cranes preferred diet of blue crab. The feeders stocked with washed toxin-free whole grain corn are an effort to supplement the Whooping Cranes diet.

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## Heron Flats Trail Restoration

By Carroll Marsh

Thirty eight yards of mud shell (dredge material) has been purchased to raise a section of Heron Flats Trail which has sunk and allows water to stand on the trail during rainy weather.

The Refuge purchased 14 yards of mud shell and several new wheel barrows and FAMI provided \$550.00 to purchase 24 yards of the shell.

On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 20 youth and 5 adults from the Ingleside, Texas middle school Science and Spanish Club began the task of wheel barrowing the shell onto Herons Flat Trail.

On January 31<sup>st</sup>, approximately 40 youth and 13 adults from Boy Scout Troop 263 from Gonzales, Texas and Troop 231 from Shiner, Texas combined their efforts and covered approximately 125 feet of the trail with a 3 inch thick layer of mud shell.

Then on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 30 youth and 12 adults (only the youth worked) from Boy Scout Troop 162 from Corpus Christi, Texas added another 3 inches on top of the previous mud shell, raising approximately 175 feet of the trail 6 inches.

There are 2 additional groups scheduled to work on February 21<sup>st</sup> and Sherri Krause's Science and Spanish Club from Port Lavaca, Texas will finish the work on February 28<sup>th</sup>.

We wish to thank these young volunteers and their adult sponsors for a job well done and on your next visit to the Refuge take a few minutes to walk this newly restored trail.



**MEMBERS RECEIVE  
15% OFF PURCHASES AT  
THE BOOKSTORE**

*The FAMI web site is up and running!*

Be sure to visit the internet home of FAMI at [www.friendsofaransas.org](http://www.friendsofaransas.org) to stay informed of refuge news, bookstore sale items and more.

# Picnic Table Installation Is Complete



By Carroll Marsh

Rusty Wainscott, Refuge staff and other volunteers have been working tirelessly installing the new picnic tables at the picnic area. These are the tables that were assembled by FAMI members and were in place in time for use by some special guests from China.

These tables will be enjoyed by many visitors!

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## ARANSAS NWR Project Leader Outlines Goals

By Dan Alonso

The first 150 days of my tenure are now behind me and I am still happy to be here! I would like to thank everyone who has welcomed me and my family to the area and we are excited to be back home among many new friends as well as old friends and family. We have settled in Rockport, Texas where the commute to the Refuge is almost identical to the commute I had in Utah.

I must admit the work at the Refuge has been fast and furious as we institute changes. As many of you know, Joe Saenz, our Deputy Refuge Manager, transferred to the Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge in south east New Mexico in February and Chris Leaser, our Law Enforcement Officer, transferred to Las Vegas NWR in north central New Mexico in November. Both positions are currently being advertised and I hope to have both vacancies filled soon.

Many people have asked me what my priorities for the Refuge are and my response has consistently been to manage the Refuge to fulfill the primary purpose of the Refuge with added emphasis on the needs of threatened and endangered species. The health and safety of our employees, volunteers and visiting public ranks high among my priorities and we have undertaken numerous measures towards providing a safe and healthy place to visit and work. The station's security and protection of the government's equipment and facilities is currently experiencing some changes which will ultimately minimize loss or damage. Some of the wildlife needs we are addressing, or moved to the forefront are: Matagorda beach clean-up, comprehensive feral hog control, whooping crane feeding, commercial crabbing and fire monitoring.

In the area of our visitor services program including environmental education we are attempting to whittle away at the backlog of projects which have come about due to staffing shortages. To aid in this program area we have restructured our organizational chart and moved one of our Assistant Managers, Vicki Muller, from a maintenance program supervisor to assist with visitor services, environmental education, FAMI work projects, and our Youth Conservation Corp program.

The tasks before us on the Aransas Refuge Complex at times seem daunting, but certainly not insurmountable. I have complete confidence in the Refuge staff, volunteers and FAMI working cooperatively towards addressing the needs of our natural resources and the visiting public.

## MARCH 2009

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**March 7: Aransas Lecture Series** – Matagorda Island Sea Turtle Project by Texas Master Naturalist Ray Kirkwood

**March 14:** Birding 101, A walk through headquarters habitats by Bird Expert Bron Rorex

**Van Tours** offered every Saturday and Sunday at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. Call for reservations 361-286-3559

**Weekly Bird Survey** is conducted at the Refuge from September thru May. If you are interested and would like to get involved, contact Barbara Bruns at 361-575-5505 or the Refuge at 361-286-3559 for more information.

## APRIL 2009

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**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED: TO WORK THE VISITOR CENTER FRONT DESK AND TO HANDLE SALES FOR THE FAMI BOOKSTORE – CONTACT BECKY CLAYTON, BOOKSTORE MANAGER AT 361-286-3559 FOR MORE INFORMATION**

**April 15:** Fishing opens at all access points

**April 18:** Wildflower walk by Texas A&M Extension Office, Ernie Edmondson; National Wildlife Refuge Birthday

**April 18 – 26: National Wildlife Week**

**April 22: Earth Day**

**April 24: Arbor Day**

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MAY 2009						
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**May 5: Fishing Clinic** – The refuge hosts the annual fishing clinic day for local school children. Volunteers are needed to staff various educational booths. Contact Tonya Stinson at 361-286-3559 for more information or to sign up.

**May 7: Migration Day** – The refuge hosts the annual Migration Day for local school children. Volunteers are needed to staff various educational booths. Contact Tonya Stinson at 361-286-3559 for more information or to sign up.

**May 9: International Migratory Bird Day**

**Weekly Bird Survey** is conducted at the Refuge from September thru May. If you are interested and would like to get involved, contact Barbara Bruns at 361-575-5505 or the Refuge at 361-286-3559 for more information.

## HELP NEEDED

We have two open positions on the Board of Directors. Publications Coordinator is responsible for assembling the newsletters and maintaining the Friends website. Training and assistance will be provided. Projects Coordinator organizes and leads FAMI work projects on the Refuge. Contact Annie Clayton at 361-286-3559 ext 222 for more information.

### CAMERAS NEEDED!

### CAMERAS NEEDED!

The Friends are collecting used digital cameras. We will loan them to students when they visit the Refuge. If you have a digital camera that you are no longer using but have not thrown out, bring them to the Refuge or mail it to FAMI, PO Box 74 Austwell Texas 77950. We'll recycle these cameras with students!

# FAMI OFFICERS VISIT OUR NATION'S CAPITAL

By Cindi Barrett

One of the new creatures I encountered during my first winter of volunteering at Aransas was a harvester ant, *Pogonomyrmex barbatus*. Until 2006, I had never seen harvester ants; I was only familiar with sugar ants (nuisance), carpenter ants (destructive) and fire ants (painful). I noticed that something was moving birdseed out of the feeder I had placed next to my RV. I hadn't seen any birds at the feeder but I was working at the Visitor Center so perhaps I hadn't seen the birds. On closer inspection, I discovered that ants were picking up sunflower and safflower seeds, and carrying the seed out of the feeder. With determination they carried these seeds out of the feeder, up the side of the tube feeder, across the hanger, down the post and across the ground to the entrance to their tunnel system. I was fascinated with these creatures and watched them as they frequently cleaned out the bird feeder. Together as a team they worked for the collective good of the colony.

FAMI President Annie Clayton and I just attended the Friends Conference in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the USFWS. Two members of every Friends group were invited to attend with members of their refuge staff. As the new Grant Coordinator, Annie had asked me to attend so I could take advantage of the planned sessions on grant writing. The National Wildlife Refuge Association, with whom FAMI is affiliated, also invited representatives from each group to stay an additional day to rally on Capitol Hill and lobby for Refuge funding.

If someone told me several years ago when I retired that I would come back out of retirement to visit Capitol Hill to lobby and speak out, I would not have believed them! Not a chance! It's something that I have never liked about our government system and Washington, D.C. While I have felt strongly about issues, I have never spoken up or actively worked for my beliefs.

The pace in Washington was frenetic. Walking around Capitol Hill, the harvester ants came to mind; there is no idle wandering. The difference is that these harvester ants were humans seeking legislation for money, changed laws or new laws for their particular cause. This Capitol Hill harvester ant, *P. barbatus capitol hillus*, is clad usually in a business suit and has an appendage called a Blackberry®. They have unique vocalizations like "bill number," "we're in favor", "we're against." On February 24th Annie and I did our best to mimic harvester ants working along with other Friends members for the collective good of the National Wildlife Refuge System. I'll call us *P. barbatus friendus*.

Swarming over Capitol Hill, *P. barbatus friendus* sought support for a \$514M appropriation for refuge operations in fiscal 2010 and \$900M funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Created in 1965, the LWCF was to be funded with royalty monies from offshore oil and gas leases. Despite record breaking royalties from these leases, this fund has only been fully funded once in over 40 years. For Fiscal 2008, it only received \$130M. All land acquisition, conservation easements and water rights are purchased from this fund. \$514M are the funds needed to just keep the Fish and Wildlife Service operating at current levels accounting for inflation. Allocation at this amount would prevent the \$3.5 billion maintenance backlog from getting any larger.

Teamed with the Friends from Balcones and MidCoast Refuges we visited the offices of Senators Hutchison and Cornyn. Midcoast also joined us as we visited the office of Congressman Ron Paul. We asked the Senators and the Congressman to support the \$514M and \$900M funding levels. Dan Alonso had asked us to make them aware of some of the unique issues at Aransas. We left briefing sheets on the plight of the whooping cranes, the need for protecting additional crane habitat as their population increases and the lack of legislation for making beach polluters accountable for the costs of beach cleanup. We met with staffers of Senator Hutchison and Senator Cornyn, and directly with Congressman Paul. The meetings were cordial and everyone communicated that change was coming on the conservation front. We challenged them to visit Refuges in Texas or close to Washington, DC.

At the end of the day, the *P. barbatus friendus* went back to the hotel exhausted, but exhilarated by the experience. Annie and I agree that we cannot keep up with the pace of *P. barbatus capitol hillus*. We were excited by the fact we had stepped out of our comfort zones to lobby our elected officials. We feel that we can continue to support the Refuge System by writing letters to our legislators and local newspapers; it is a way to provide support without sore feet. I encourage all of you to join the National Wildlife Refuge Association. ([www.refugenet.org](http://www.refugenet.org)) NWRA does an excellent job of staying abreast of issues that impact Refuges and alerting their members of these issues in a timely fashion.

If you are good with words, enjoy writing letters and learning about new things, we could certainly use your support in volunteering to take on some advocacy responsibilities for the Friends group. The more the Friends speak out with our local, state and federal lawmakers, the greater the chance for success. Making the local communities aware of the issues through letters to the editors of the local papers also helps to influence our lawmakers. Please contact me, [cindibarreATAol.com](http://cindibarreATAol.com), if you can provide any assistance.



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

**FAMI Mission Statement**  
Friends of Aransas of Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges (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 refuges through educational, interpretive, scientific and other activities appropriate to the mission of these Refuges.

## Membership Application

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip code \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Other Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

## 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 \$

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Total Amount Enclosed

**Memberships expire  
September 30<sup>th</sup> each year.**

Make checks payable to:

Friends of Aransas & Matagorda Island

Mail to: P. O. Box 74

Austwell, Texas 77950