

AMIGO

Aransas & Matagorda Island Guardian/Orator

Summer 2008, Volume 10 Number 3



Dear Friends:

By the time you get this message, I will have retired from the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex. However, I cannot let this newsletter pass without thanking each and every one of you for your generous work and support to the Refuge.

On May 23, 2008, you the Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island co-sponsored a wonderful retirement party for me and my wife, Kathie. We both had a fun time and we thank you for making the evening a memorable event.

I am so very proud of what you our Friends have become and the work you are able to get done for the Refuge.

Sincerely,
Charles Holbrook
Refuge Manager (Retired)

Note: We wish Charlie and Kathie the very best as they make their home in Port Clinton, Ohio.

Bench Fund Report

I am pleased to report that 6 benches have been purchased. Two were installed on the board walk at the tower (see picture). Three were installed at the Visitors Center in the area of the gazebo on Friday, June 13th by Boy Scouts from Port Arthur, Beaumont and Silsbee, Texas. The Boy Scouts also painted the gazebo, trimmed the trees and clean up the area around the gazebo. The sixth bench was installed on the new fishing pier at the suggestion of Officer Chris Leeser.

If you would like to suggest a location for future benches please contact me by phone at 361-645-8746.

A total of \$2,886.63 has been received from 16 individuals and from contributions to our donation boxes. Individual donations have been received from Olivia Mendoza, Katherine Cullen, Cindi Barrett, Carroll & Charla Marsh, Hilde Kaigler, Ray Little, Jo Turner (by Krystal & Ray Bringham), Beverly Fletcher, Alice & Rusty Wainscott, Jack Tindal, Margery Wessell, Karen Knight, Delta Kappa Gamma, Annie & David Clayton, Texas A&M Elderhostel and Jim King. Each bench will have a plaque that reads "Donated by FAMI".

We would like to thank each of you for making this fundraiser a big success and to encourage others to participate.

Thank You
Carroll Marsh
FAMI Projects Coordinator



THREATS TO WHOOPING CRANE HABITAT

By Tom Stehn, USFWS

HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS AT ARANSAS

Every year, USFWS reports to Congress on the status of all endangered species. In 2007, I changed the status of the whooping crane from “increasing” to “stable” based on what I perceived as growing threats. Even though whooping crane numbers are continuing to increase, threats to the winter range and migration corridor have become imminent.

In 2007, the USFWS provided comments on 4 housing developments at Aransas in areas occasionally used by whooping cranes. Construction has started on 3 of these developments. Whatever you’re hearing in the news about a mortgage crisis and slow down in the housing market just doesn’t seem to apply to the Texas Coast. The homes being built are planned as retirement homes and/or second homes for the wealthy with canal access to keep a boat in the water right by the back door.

As real estate development pressures increase at Aransas, permanent protection of the crane’s habitat is essential in order for the species to reach long-term recovery goals. It is quite apparent that there is currently not enough publicly-owned marsh to support the 1,000 cranes set as a target for down listing. Without protecting additional lands, whooping cranes will not have enough winter area to support flock expansion and recovery goals may never be reached. Whooping cranes already use wetlands and adjacent upland habitats outside of Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges. With 39% of the flock currently wintering on private lands, protection from development is needed for those areas. Upland buffers a minimum of 300 meters wide are needed along all marsh areas used by the cranes to provide them necessary upland foraging habitat, access to fresh water sources and a buffer from disturbance.

The Texas Nature Conservancy (TNC) with assistance from USFWS and other agencies is working hard trying to protect key areas with conservation easements placed on buffer areas and figure out a way for people and wildlife to coexist. Hopefully, the first two parcels to be protected with conservation easements will total approximately 4,200 acres and be located at a major crane use area at Welder Flats.

To try to protect additional habitat, the TNC applied for a 1.5 million dollar grant from the Coastal Impacts Assistance Program to protect 5,000 acres of crane habitat in the next 3 years primarily through purchase of conservation easements. Matching funds would have to be obtained. This grant application was not funded in 2008. However, it made “the cut” of worthwhile projects for which there just weren’t sufficient funds available. The TNC is hopeful that this is a good omen for receiving funding in future years.

In a related issue as the coast is developed, the growing demand for water threatens freshwater inflows at Aransas that are needed to maintain abundant blue crab populations, the primary food source for whooping cranes. In the whooping crane migration corridor, thousands of wind turbines are being built. Assuming that most of the whooping cranes will avoid wind farms, the development of wind energy may result in removing thousands of acres of migration habitat from the cranes. In addition, I am extremely concerned about the infrastructure of power lines associated with the development of wind energy in the corridor since collisions with power lines are the number one known mortality for fledged whooping cranes! The USFWS has been communicating with the wind energy development industry to try to assess potential impacts to the whooping crane flock.

As in the history of the effort to save whooping cranes, there is now as great a need as ever for citizen involvement in protecting the species. Conservation will not happen unless people push to make it happen. The role of groups such as FAMI is very important. The Endangered Species Act is quite strong in protecting individual birds, but can fall short in protecting needed habitat. Yet

conservationists know that habitat is the key to protecting species. Without protecting the habitat needed for recovery, the number of whooping cranes will reach a point where the population is no longer growing. A massive effort of habitat protection is needed at Aransas and in the migration corridor. Housing developments at Aransas and wind farm construction in the migration corridor are not going to be stopped. My goal is to get the developers to implement measures to offset impacts.



The “Reserve at St. Charles”, construction started April 2008

Aransas Lecture Series and Interpretive Van Tours Offer Excellent Learning and Viewing Opportunities for Visitors

By Bernice Jackson, USFWS



Ernie Edmundson conducts the "Wildflower Walk".

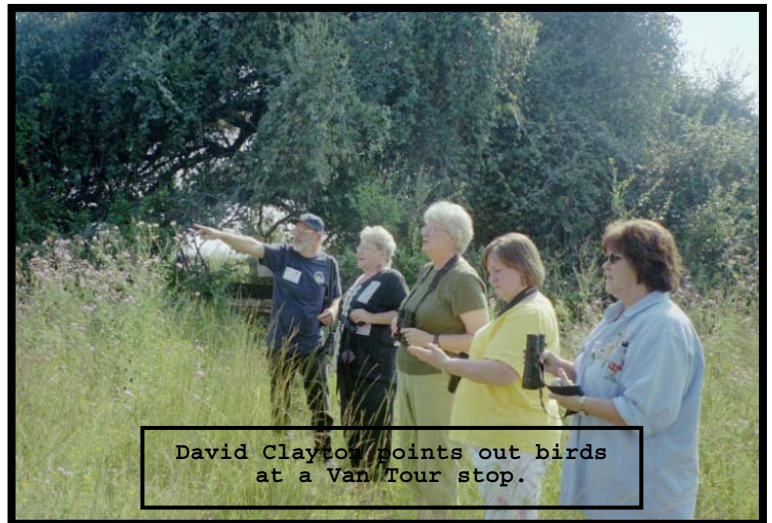
Aransas National Wildlife Refuge offered seasonal programs to visitors from October 2007 through April 2008. These programs met in the Visitor Center auditorium at noon on Saturdays and were generally presented as PowerPoint programs. Only one or two were conducted outside the building to enhance identification of birds or wildflowers. One hundred and twenty-nine visitors attended the monthly programs. In October, as part of National Wildlife Refuge Week, FAMI Member & Texas Master Naturalist, Norman Hirsch presented "Alligator, Denizen of Refuge Wetlands". November's topic was Sea Turtles by FAMI Member & Texas Master Naturalist, Ray Kirkwood. In December we celebrated Aransas NWRC's 70th Anniversary with activities which included a Whooping Crane program by Ray Kirkwood. January's program on Red Tide had to be cancelled. In February, a program about the Attwater's Prairie

Chicken was presented by APCNWR Volunteer, Ron Rundberg. The March program was "Aboriginal People of Coastal Texas" by Texas Master Naturalist, T.J. Fox. Aransas County Extension employee and Texas Master Naturalist, Ernie Edmundson rounded out the season with a "Wildflower Walk" around the Visitor Center in April.

Four hundred eighty-nine visitors participated in Aransas' Interpretive Van Tours this past season from October 2007 through April 2008. The guided tours were offered every Saturday and Sunday from January through April at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Additionally, tours were offered in October as part of National Wildlife Refuge Week activities, in November in conjunction with the Lecture Series, and in December in celebration of Aransas NWRC's 70th Anniversary. Tours are conducted by trained volunteers. This year's cadre included Annie and David Clayton, Robert Angerstein, Dick and Barb Klopshinske, Devra Hunter, Wayne Daggs, Allan Weber, Hugh Turner, Tammy Mierop, Lynne Hughes, Diane Pletcher, Ron Sawyer, Martha Riccio and Kris and Ray Kirkwood. Tours ran approximately two

hours and provided visitors with an opportunity to learn about the National Wildlife Refuge System and the rich natural and cultural history of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Visitors were likely to see alligator, javelina, whooping crane, wild turkey, white-tailed deer, armadillo and a variety of other birds including ducks, geese, sandhill cranes and wading birds. Reservations were required due to limited seating and binoculars were available on loan from the Visitor Center.



David Clayton points out birds at a Van Tour stop.

If you are interested in attending or participating in either of these programs during the 2008 - 2009 season please contact Bernice Jackson by phone at 361-286-3559 or by email at Bernice_JacksonATfws.gov.

Did you know?

Continued from previous newsletter...

By Cindi Barrett

In 1951, plans were made to reduce the size of Josephine and Crip's pen. The smaller pen had additional posts and more strands of barbed wire than other refuge fences. An electric wire was strung at the base of the fence to prevent raccoons and other predators from claiming another chick. Josephine and Crip were not fazed by the changes in their habitat. Dancing was observed and photographed.



The Whooper Snooper Club again faithfully observed the birds minute by minute on a thirteen hour basis. Weather conditions were extremely wet that year. High tides and rising water threatened the nest. The birds were repeatedly observed trying to build up the nest. Efforts were made by the observers to elevate the nest using hay. Despite all bird and human efforts, high tides floated the eggs from the nest and it was abandoned.

Shortly thereafter politics interfered in the captive breeding process at Aransas; Josephine was reclaimed by the New Orleans Zoo. This was before the Endangered Species Act gave the US Fish and Wildlife Service custodial disposition of any endangered species. Fish and Wildlife officials compassionately allowed Crip to be transferred to the New Orleans Zoo so the pair was not separated. It was not until 1957 that Josephine and Crip successfully hatched two chicks.

If you would like to read more details about the early days of captive breeding of whooping cranes, try Faith McNulty's book, *The Whooping Crane*. While published in 1966 it is still considered the most definitive record of early captive whooping crane recovery program long before the creation of the Endangered Species Act. Today's cooperative teamwork amongst the Whooping Crane Recovery Team members and between multiple captive breeding locations is a far cry from the early days of captive breeding at Aransas.

Special thanks to Cindi Barrett for the Aransas Captive Breeding Series.

If you are interested in more historical articles please contact

Charla Marsh AT 2marsh2@gmail.com or by phone at 361-645-8746.

WHOOPING CRANE NESTING UPDATE

Whooping crane breeding pair surveys were carried out by the Canadian Wildlife Service, May 16-19 in Wood Buffalo National Park. They located 72 territorial pairs; 6 of the territorial pairs were not breeding this year, resulting in a record 66 nests. This was one more nest than last year. In addition, they discovered another 12 sub-adult pairs for a total of 84 pairs. Single cranes were scattered throughout the nesting area. Surveys scheduled for mid-June will document the number of chicks that hatch.

Habitat conditions on the breeding grounds in the northeastern corner of Wood Buffalo National Park and adjacent areas were better than expected. At weather stations on either side of the nesting area, below normal snowfall levels were reported. However there was an abundance of rain during late August and September 2007. These higher than expected water levels resulted in normal to above normal habitat conditions throughout the majority of the nesting area.

Brian Johns

Whooping Crane Coordinator

Canadian Wildlife Service

Where the Birds Are!

SUMMARY OF THE WEEKLY BIRD SURVEYS FOR THE REFUGE

Sept. 2007 - May 2008

By Barbara Bruns

The weekly bird surveys by volunteer groups have successfully concluded the season and what a year! Starting with the first week in September thru the last week in May, the teams encountered varied and challenging conditions. It becomes a real treasure hunt for the best bird of the day or the most notable observation.

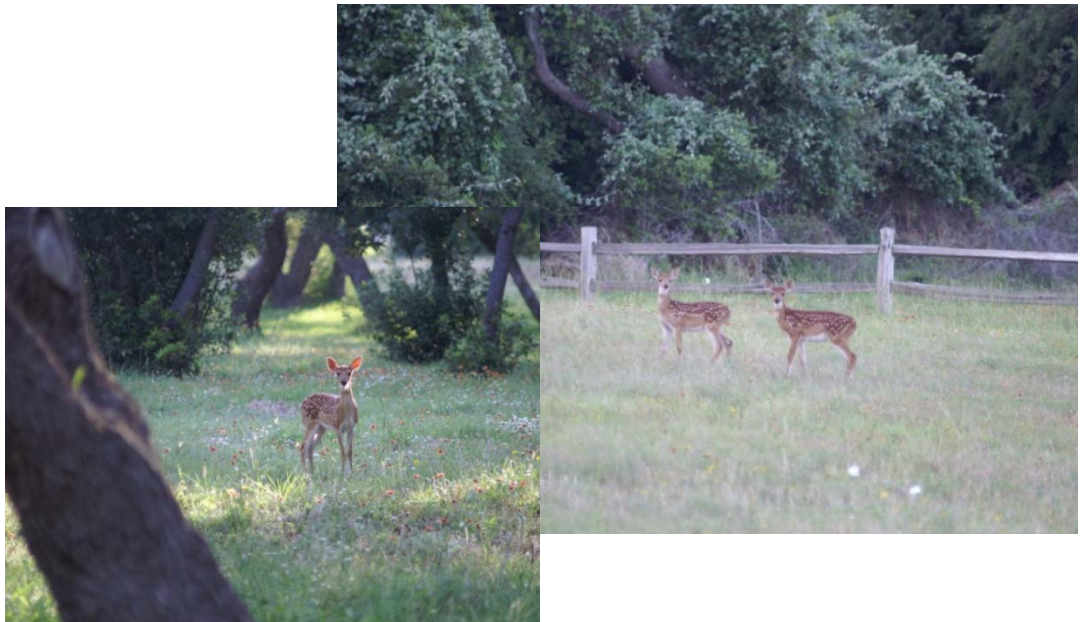
Dealing with very wet habitat in the Fall and Winter, very windy Spring and unpredictable weather, we still managed to wrap each visit into an enjoyable one. Our reports are all documented and the current survey list is placed at the Visitor Center desk. Week after week, it seemed the birdiest area was around the Visitor Center and windmill pond with spectacular views of Vermilion Flycatchers, Great Kiskadees, Couch's Kingbirds, various ducks, grebes, herons, egrets and a rare sighting of a Masked Duck. Whooping Cranes were seen weekly, November 2007 thru the first week of April 2008 from the observation tower. White-tailed Hawks were spotted across from Bird Trail #2 and by the end of March had built a nest.

Spring migration reached its peak in May with warblers, vireos, tanagers, orioles, flycatchers, grosbeaks and buntings dropping-in to quickly feed on the abundant food sources and then move on to their final destinations. The rainbow of colors seemed overwhelming at times. The reported hotspots were at the Picnic area and Dagger Point trail. With anticipation we also awaited the arrival of the Swainson's Warbler. They were seen and heard in May at the Picnic area, Big Tree trail and between the Tower to Hog Lake area. This warbler is a spring and summer resident with the first breeding record dating back to the 1980's. It thrives in dense undergrowth and some of the previous locations mentioned provide that perfect habitat.

As in the past years, we take a summertime break and reassemble again for the next season. We will start the first week of September 2008 and schedule our groups through May 2009. Anyone interested in participating with these weekly bird surveys, contact Barbara Bruns at 361-575-5505.

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Nursery - By Cindi Barrett

You're not seeing double if you see twin fawns just past the main gate. There are other fawns under the oak trees near the Visitors Center. Don't miss the baby turkeys roaming about. Heck, why not come check out all the babies for yourself!



Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex Hosts 2008 Going Wild! Events

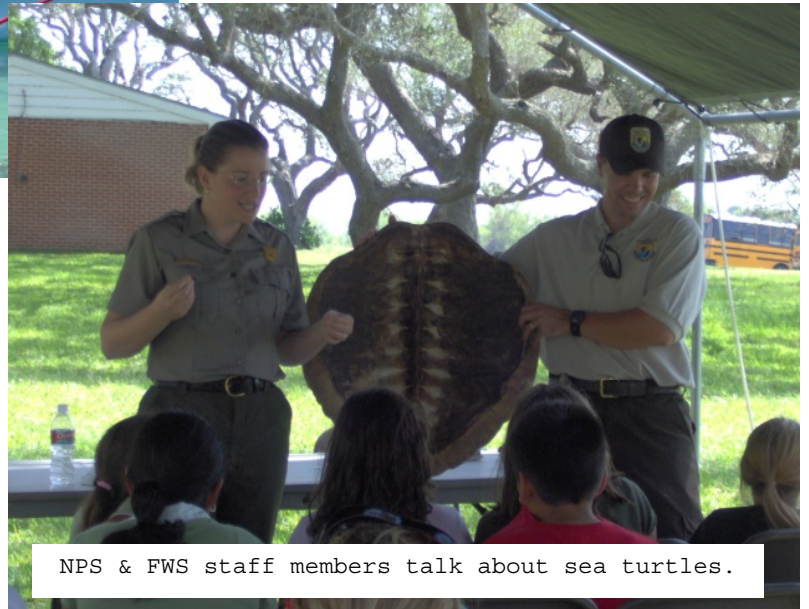
By Bernice Jackson, USFWS

Two fun-filled outdoor environmental education events were held at the Refuge during the first week of May. Over 500 students were bused to the Refuge for activities celebrating National Fishing and Boating Week and International Migratory Bird Week. Students learned all about fishing and migration by rotating through learning stations staffed by experts in their field. Over the years, we have come to rely on talented professionals who serve as core presenters and so generously spend the day with our kids. Students and teachers get a rare opportunity to learn from a concentration of conservationists. They definitely realize the opportunity and look forward to the activities. Each year, teachers phone the Refuge at the beginning of the school year to make sure they are on the call list for these fun-filled days. They get so excited about these Refuge events that connect children and nature!



Students learn the art of fishing.

Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Refuge System and Aransas NWRC. The event began at 9:00 a.m. and went until mid-afternoon. Students rotated through 13 learning stations with topics of fish identification, rod/reel casting, fishing tackle, rules and regulations, ethics, boating safety, wetlands, fish printing, fish building, fly fishing and fly tying techniques, salmon migration game, fishing for catfish in tanks, and a special talk from Malkolm Boothroyd and his parents Ken and Wendy from Birdyear.com. The Boothroyd family has taken a year to bird by bicycle from Alaska to Florida and back. They stopped by the Refuge both coming and going.



NPS & FWS staff members talk about sea turtles.

A Migration Day was held on Thursday, May 8 to celebrate International Migratory Bird Day with 258, fourth grade students from Austwell-Tivoli, Port O'Connor, Refugio, Seadrift, Rockport and Victoria Independent School Districts. Rockport's Sacred Heart Catholic School also attended. In addition to the students, 62 teachers, 22 partners and 77 volunteers participated. Students learned all about wildlife migration and the perils of this journey. The event began at 9:00 a.m. and went until mid-afternoon with students rotating through 14 learning stations with topics of hawks, bats, jellyfish, sea turtles, whooping cranes, monarch butterflies, wetlands, waterfowl, hummingbirds, snakes and their feeding behavior. Additional activities included a salmon migration game, wildlife crochet and an open-air guided tour on the Refuge auto loop.



FAMI EXHIBIT A.K.A. THE “BRAG BOARD”

By Cindi Barrett

When I first joined the FAMI Board of Directors, Alice Wainscott and Beverly Fletcher expressed a desire for FAMI to have some way to advertise its' accomplishments. It quickly became the “Brag board” project, a place where FAMI could brag about its projects, grants and activities. Thus, the idea for a FAMI exhibit, a.k.a. “Brag board” began.

Last summer, while home in Maine, I learned about special Friends grants from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). There are three different grants that they award twice a year; start-up, capacity building and project specific. FAMI applied for and received a “Capacity Building” grant from NFWF. With this grant, the “Brag board” went from just being an idea to an electronic display and other ways of building FAMI capacity came along.

Designing the “Brag board” was a team effort on the part of the Board of Directors. Carroll Marsh, Project Coordinator, stepped up to build the display. He came up with the idea of building a panel that can be mounted anywhere in the Visitor Center. He routed the FAMI logo into the wood and used his wife’s oven to “cook” the Plexiglas that formed the three holders mounted on the panel. One of the holders is very special because he used a piece of the windshield of a B-29 bomber, given to him by a friend. The entire FAMI Board of Directors provided input on projects that best represented FAMI as well as reviewed the basic design and content of the electronic presentation.

The “Brag board” is a PowerPoint© presentation that has been made into a DVD. The display is a 32” widescreen flat panel TV mounted onto the wooden panel Carroll designed. Running continuously, the presentation displays various FAMI projects photographically through the past ten years. It advocates additional National Refuge System funding and solicits people to join FAMI. It is our hope that the “Brag board” will contribute to an increase in donations, membership and member involvement.

When it comes to Capacity Building, FAMI hasn’t stopped with just the “Brag board”. You might have noticed that the quarterly newsletter is looking pretty crisp and spiffy these days. Part of the grant went to purchase a high capacity color laser printer. FAMI also purchased a laptop computer. This will be used several ways, along with the laser printer; it can be used for future production of newsletters. Using the laptop and a digital projector, we hope to start a speakers’ bureau of FAMI members. Speakers’ bureau members would make presentations about the Refuge at local meetings and schools. The laptop will also be used to present the FAMI “Brag board” at various local festivals. But we’re not done yet. Funds will also be used to develop a FAMI website over the summer. The website will allow FAMI to post Refuge projects and activities as well as our newsletters on the internet. In short, we are building FAMI capacity with this grant. The “Brag board” is just the beginning!

On April 13, 2008 David Clayton, Carroll Marsh & Rusty Wainscott installed the FAMI “Brag Board” in the Visitors Center.



New Record for Nesting Turtles on Matagorda Island

By Katherine Cullen

As of June 3, 2008 ten sea turtle nests have been found on the island, an increase of 25% so far from the 2007 nesting season. Each nest was excavated and the eggs sent to Padre Island National Seashore for incubation, one nest had 127 eggs, which is a record. There is a possibility that one of the ten nests may be that of a green turtle. Another record was three nests found and excavated on the same day; a Kemp's ridley was on the nest at the first site. So far three wild Kemp's ridley's have been documented on the island. A wild turtle is one that has never been tagged. June 4th the total nesting record for the Texas coast was 159, exceeding the previous year's number.

The turtle patrol volunteers put in many long arduous hours covering the entire length of the island in search of turtles and nest sites. They also document both dead and live stranded turtles that come ashore. The live ones are sent to the ARK in Port Aransas for rehabilitation and release.



The program was expanded this year from two patrol teams to three; with team members staying on the island two to seven days providing more patrol hours. New also this season is the addition of Ashley Inslee who coordinates the program and stays on the island with the volunteers. She is trained to excavate the nest sites; this means eggs get transported more quickly to Padre Island's incubation facility. Her commitment

and that of all the volunteers is deeply appreciated, each year the reward of this dedication are more turtles and nest sites found.



Turtle Patrollers: Donna McKinney & Julianne Thompson with Coordinator Ashley Inslee
Photos by Donna McKinney 5/23/2008

ConocoPhillips Presents Check

On May 23, 2008, Kurt Paton, HSE Supervisor of ConocoPhillips' Gulf Coast STX Operations, presented a check for \$12,000 to the FAMI Board of Directors. ConocoPhillips continues to support the Refuge through regular contributions to FAMI. These funds will be used to further the mission of FAMI which is to support and assist the Refuge in its goal of enhancing habitat and wildlife and encouraging compatible wildlife dependent public uses of the Refuge through educational, interpretive, scientific and other activities appropriate to the mission of these Refuges.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Compiled by Annie Clayton

Fishing is open from all access points (allowed year round from the fishing pier.)



Refuge Requests Volunteer Help for Project on Matagorda Island

On Sunday, June 22, 2008, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex will be conducting a florescent light bulb pick up on Matagorda Island. Participants will arrive at Fulton Harbor at 8:15 am. After a brief orientation and sign-up they will board the Skimmer for a one hour trip to the Island. The goal of the day is for teams to remove light tubes off of 10 to 15 miles of beach. Participants will need to provide their lunch and gloves if available.

Space is extremely limited and you must be 18 years old.

Email to reserve your spot today to:

Amanda McLaughlin, Project Coordinator, at amanda_mclaughlin@fws.gov

Announcing

October 12, 2008 - 2nd annual 'Big Sit' event

December 2008 - Audubon Christmas Bird Count (date to be announced later)

For both of these events contact Barbara Bruns at 361-575-5505.



Make a Difference – Volunteer!!!

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and FAMI are seeking volunteers with smiling faces to work in the Visitors Center. The Visitors Center is open 7 days a week, from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm. Volunteers can work half or full days. Working the front desk is fun and interesting as you will meet people from around the world. Training will be provided. Please call Bernice Jackson, Volunteer Coordinator at 361-286-3559 for more information.



Watch for more information about upcoming project days or
contact – Carroll Marsh at 361-645-8746 or 2marsh2@gmail.com

WEB SITES OF INTEREST:

www.fws.gov
www.refugenet.net
www.tpwd.state.tx.us
www.ncseonline.org
www.txcoastalbend.org
www.audubon.org
www.refugeassociation.org
www.nature.org/texas/

Please email comments and
suggestions concerning the content
and format of this publication to
Charla Marsh
Publications Coordinator at
2marsh2@gmail.com

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 30th each year.**

Make checks payable to:

Friends of Aransas & Matagorda Island

Mail to: P. O. Box 74

Austwell, Texas 77950

FAMI Mission Statement

Friends of Aransas of Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges (FAMI) will 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.

Friends of Aransas/Matagorda Island
National Wildlife Refuges
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