

# AMIGO

Aransas & Matagorda Island Guardian/Orator  
Winter 2008      Volume 10 Number 1

## General Meeting of FAMI Membership

On December 8<sup>th</sup> fifty FAMI members attended the annual membership meeting. Thirty five members enjoyed a Whooping Crane boat tour then a delicious lunch was served at the Visitors Center which was followed by an informative business meeting. Thanks to Cindi Barrett, Alice Wainscott & Beverly Fletcher for putting it all together.



*Dear Friends:*

*Lately I have been thinking about the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex from a very different perspective. As many of you know, my favorite topic of discussion has been retirement. Yet when the time came for me to go, I changed my mind. If you are asking why, the answer is simple. Like you, Kathie and I love this Refuge and all of the complexities and diversities that make it up. We are very proud of you, our friends and all that you have helped the Refuge accomplish. With your help we have made the Refuge a better place for fish and wildlife and for the thousands of visitors we receive annually.*

*It is always gratifying to step back and reflect on our accomplishments and know that none of what we have done could have been done without you, our friends. Keep up the good work and I look forward to being with you for a little while longer.*

*Charles Holbrook, Project Leader  
Aransas National Wildlife Complex*

## Bench Fundraiser

The Refuge is in need of benches at several locations. The Board Walk at the Tower needs at least 3 benches for our visitors to rest and observe wildlife.

The benches will be similar to the one at the entrance to the Visitors Center. We have located some that can be purchased for under \$500.00 but if we purchase 2 or more at the same time we can reduce that price even more.

The Board of Directors would like to encourage you to donate to this cause. All donations are tax deductible and FAMI will provide a receipt for donations of \$200.00 or more.

Please mail your check payable to FAMI to Friends of Aransas & Matagorda Island, Attn: Alice Wainscott, P O Box 74, Austwell, TX 77950.



From left: Jacob Guajardo, Joseph Mendoza, Jr. & Olivia Mendoza.

Picture by: Josephine Farias 12/08/07

## And A Child Shall Lead Us!

The first donation for our bench fund made a big impression on me and I thought I should share it with you. Olivia Mendoza was the first to respond to our call for donations during the Membership Meeting on December 8, 2007. She gathered all the money she could and made the first donation of 62 cents. Since Olivia's donation FAMI has received donations from: Katherine Cullen, Cindi Barrett, Charla & Carroll Marsh, Hilde Kaigler, Ray Little, Jo Turner (given as a gift by Krystal & Ray Brigham), Beverly Fletcher, Alice & Rusty Wainscott and Jack Tindall.

I am pleased to announce that the first order of two benches was placed on January 8, 2008 and installation will be complete ASAP.

Thanks Olivia for your example!!

Carroll Marsh  
Projects Coordinator



## Thanks ConocoPhillips!

**FAMI TREASURER, ALICE WAINSCOTT ACCEPTS A \$10,000 CHECK FROM RANDY BLACK, CONOCOPHILLIPS STX OPERATIONS MANAGER. CONOCOPHILLIPS HAS BEEN IN THE AREA SINCE 1935 TWO YEARS BEFORE THE REFUGE WAS CREATED. THEIR CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE REFUGE AND ITS MISSION IS GREATLY APPRECIATED. THESE FUNDS HAVE BEEN DESIGNATED TOWARD THE COST OF A**

**NEW REFUGE VIDEO.**

## WHOOPING CRANE SOARS TO ANOTHER RECORD HIGH

By Tom Stehn, Whooping Crane Coordinator, USFWS

The tallest bird in North America has something special to “whoop” about. In December, census flights at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and surrounding areas documented a record flock size of 266. The flock consists of an estimated 142 adults, 85 subadults, and 39 juveniles. These are the highest numbers of endangered whooping cranes wintering in Texas in approximately the last 100 years. The current population exceeds by 29 the previous high of 237 whoopers present in the fall of 2006.

The estimated flock size of 266 is a result of excellent production (from a record 65 nests) of 40 juveniles sighted on the nesting grounds in August just prior to fledging. With 39 juveniles arriving safely in Texas this winter, survival of the juveniles since August was excellent. One carcass of a juvenile was found in the fall in Saskatchewan with the cause of death unknown. Adult survival since last spring has also been very good. Mortality of white-plumaged cranes between spring and fall, 2007 was at most 9 birds, or 3.8% of the flock present at Aransas in spring, 2007. This is calculated by taking the spring flock size (236), adding the number of juveniles

that made it to Texas (39), and subtracting the current estimated flock size (266). In the previous two years, mortality between spring and fall has been above average and totaled over 20 birds each year. One indication of adult mortality in 2007 subsequent to nesting was the arrival of one adult with one chick seen in Saskatchewan in the fall and at Aransas during the winter.

One of the surviving 39 juveniles was sighted with sandhill cranes at Muleshoe NWR in west Texas in November and is wintering at an unknown location. One whooping crane apparently resumed its migration from North Dakota on December 22nd. This is the furthest north a whooping crane has ever been located just before Christmas. All the water bodies were frozen so the crane was roosting in a shelterbelt and feeding in agricultural fields. At Aransas, especially notable is one whooping crane pair with two chicks. Although whooping cranes normally hatch two chicks every year, usually only one of the youngsters is able to survive. The pair with two chicks has a territory on the south tip of



Aransas and are the first cranes the tour boats usually see once they reach the refuge, providing the public a great opportunity to see the family of four. They are the 13th two-chick family to reach Aransas since 1997 when the egg pickup was halted.

The population in Texas reached a low of only 15 birds in 1941 before efforts were taken to protect the species and its habitat. The population has been growing at about four percent annually and reached 100 birds in 1987 and 200 birds in 2004. However, the whooping crane population continues to face many threats, including collisions with power lines in migration, development of wind power in the migration corridor, limited genetic variability in the flock, loss of crane migration habitat, and winter habitat threatened with housing developments, chemical spills, sea level rise, and loss of productivity due to reduced fresh water inflows.

The only natural wild whooping crane population nests in the Northwest Territories of Canada in summer and migrate 2,400 miles to winter at the Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges and surrounding areas. Their winter range stretches out over 35 miles of the Texas coast about 45 miles north of Corpus Christi, Texas. Wintering whooping cranes use salt marsh habitat foraging primarily for blue crabs. Unlike most other bird species, whooping cranes are territorial in both summer and winter and will defend and chase all other whooping cranes out of their estimated 350-acre territories.

Two late migrants at the Hagerman NWR, Sherman, TX. After a stayover of 20 hours, they continued the migration south.  
Photo by Rick Cantu, USFWS - 12/17/07

It takes about seven hours of flying to cover about 56,000 acres of marsh to find all the cranes. These flights determine flock size, locate crane territories, and mortalities that may occur during winter. Finding every whooping crane is quite a challenge with thousands of other white birds in the marsh including pelicans and egrets that makes spotting of cranes more difficult. Also, the cranes can move during a census flight and either not be counted or else be counted twice. Census flights are contracted with Air Logistic Solutions of San Antonio, Texas in a Cessna 210 high-wing aircraft with Pilot Gary Ritchey.

The current total North American population of wild (382) and captive (147) whooping cranes is 529. Although the whooping crane population remains endangered, the comeback of the species sets a standard for conservation efforts in North America.

## 2007 Christmas Bird Count Results

Greetings to CBC Participants,

Thank you for your interest and enthusiasm to partake in the Aransas NWR Christmas Bird Count on December 28, 2007. The weather for the day changed from cloudy, cold and windy to a sunny pleasant afternoon. I believe this presented quite a challenge in the morning to locate certain species. But with the number of groups covering all the areas, the observers presented an impressive count.

The final tally for the count circle was **165** species with **7** more reported during count week.

The 44 exclusives of the count circle for CBC day are:

**Area 1...**Wild Turkey, Red-shouldered Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Sora, Couch's Kingbird, Hummingbird, sp., Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Pine Warbler, Indigo Bunting, House Sparrow.

**Area 2...**Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Least Bittern, White-tailed Kite, Bald Eagle, Clapper Rail, Bonaparte's Gull, Common Ground-Dove, Comm on Pauraque, Blue-headed Vireo, Black & White Warbler, American Redstart, Fulvous Whistling-Duck.

**Area 3...**Reddish Egret, Marbled Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Black Skimmer, Horned Lark, Red Knot.

**Area 5...**Mallard, Brown Thrasher, Nashville Warbler.

**Area 6...**Wood Duck, Eastern Kingbird.

**Area 7...**Least Flycatcher, European Starling, Olive Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow, Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird, Aplomado Falcon, Lark Bunting.

With the most ever participating, 38 individuals eagerly on their assignments. Those registered were from California, Wisconsin, Michigan, TX...Houston, Livingston, Fort Worth, Aransas Pass, Yorktown, Port Lavaca, Rockport, Fulton and Victoria.

FAMI, sponsor for the CBC at the Refuge, and the ANWR staff greatly appreciate your participation and contribution to its success. Again, thank you for your and hope everyone enjoyed the day. Please join and support the ANWR team for the next CBC!

Best to All,  
Barbara Bruns, Compiler  
361 575-5505  
361 286-3559(Refuge)



took

help

Barbara Bruns takes a preliminary species count while volunteers enjoy lunch and a much needed rest.

## Did you know?

By Cindi Barrett, FAMI Secretary

Did you know that Aransas National Wildlife Refuge was the site of the first attempt at captive breeding of whooping cranes? Long before there were breeding programs at Patuxent, the International Crane Foundation and the Calgary Devonian Center there were captive breeding attempts at Aransas. It all started in a fenced area down by today's Heron Flats Trail in 1948. The first two birds of the program were Josephine and Pete.

Getting Josephine and Pete to Aransas did not come easy. Pete had been shot by a hunter in Gothenburg, Nebraska in 1936. He was definitely a Wood Buffalo/Aransas bird. In 1940, Josephine was found in Louisiana injured. She was part of the dwindling non-migratory Louisiana flock. Pete had been kept at a Sanctuary in Nebraska, Josephine at the New Orleans Zoo. By 1947 people were beginning to realize that in order for whooping cranes to have a chance at survival they might have to try captive breeding. Letters flew between Aransas, New Orleans, New York and Washington making arrangements to move the birds to Aransas in 1948. Washington authorized the funds to build a fence in the area of Heron Flats Trail. The birds arrived in October 1948.

Dancing was observed in April 1949. A nest was built and two eggs laid. Sadly the eggs did not hatch and after incubating the eggs for several weeks, Josephine and Pete destroyed them.



In July 1949 Pete was found dead in the enclosure. There was no sign of a struggle and it is more than likely that he died of old age. He was at least 13 years old when he arrived at Aransas. He was found injured in full adult plumage, so could have been older. It wasn't until

necropsy that they learned that Pete was really Pete. He had been called Petunia and Josephine called Joe as she was the more aggressive of the two birds.

**Continued next issue.....**

## FAMI Board of Directors

If these faces look familiar they should, the 2007 - 2008 Board of Directors remains the same as the 2006 - 2007 Board of Directors. If you see one of these hard working people pat them on the back cause they deserve it.

Back: Carroll Marsh, Jamie Gonzales, Charla Marsh, Cindi Barrett  
Front: Alice Wainscott, Beverly Fletcher, Kay Jenkins & Annie Clayton

## Grant Report

By Kay Jenkins, FAMI Grant Coordinator

At the end of 2007, FAMI received four grant awards for a total of \$62,300 thanks to the grant writing efforts of FAMI members and USFWS staff. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awarded FAMI with \$5,000 to support the Stewards of the Bay II project managed by the Refuge's Environmental Educator, Tonya Stinson, who also wrote the grant proposal. The grant funds will be used to acquire water testing kits, biological sampling kits and other learning tools used by Tonya's environmental education program at the Refuge. The grant will also cover transportation costs for teachers and students participating in the program.

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation also awarded FAMI another \$5,000 for outreach activities to promote FAMI. This proposal was written by Cindi Barrett, FAMI's Secretary, the grant funds will be used to acquire a desktop computer, a laptop computer, a printer, computer software and other supplies needed to produce the FAMI newsletter and other outreach materials as well as website development.

The Formosa Plastics Environmental Endowment Fund Trust awarded \$7,300 to FAMI to support the Matagorda Island Sea Turtle Patrol Project. The funds will be used to acquire equipment needed to facilitate additional patrols on Matagorda Island during the sea turtle nesting season. The grant proposal was written by FAMI member, Dr. Marianne Pietras.

The Gulf of Mexico Foundation awarded a Community-Based Restoration Program partnership grant to FAMI for \$45,000 to restore marsh habitat on Matagorda Island by increasing tidal flow to interior marshes cut off from tidal exchange by man-made levees built decades ago previous landowners. The proposal was written by Refuge Wildlife Biologist, Darren Welchert. The grant funds are provided to the Gulf of Mexico Foundation the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Gulf of Mexico Program and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and matching funds for the grant will be provided by the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program.



# Masked Duck Sighted

By Katherine Cullen

On January 8, a visitor reported a female masked duck, *Nomonyx dominicus*, on the visitor center pond where it was observed mingling with blue wing teal and other waterfowl. This sighting was confirmed by Chad Stinson, Katherine Cullen and Cindi Barrett. This rare observation represents only the ninth record of masked duck for the Refuge, the last sighting was reported over ten years ago in 1997. Masked ducks are a small stiff-tailed species related to ruddy ducks and are distinguished from other stiff-tails by the large white wing patch. This little duck inhabits ponds and small lakes in tropical and subtropical climates.

Masked duck

(Katherine Cullen 01/08/08)



# Refuge Events

September 2007 -  
May 2008



Weekly bird survey  
Contact Barbara Bruns  
at 361-578-5505  
for more information

**FEB 1-3**  
Matagorda Island  
Working Weekend  
Contact Carroll  
Marsh, Projects  
Coordinator  
for more information  
at 361-645-8746

January - April  
Interpretive Van Tours  
each Saturday & Sunday  
at 10:00am & 1:00 pm  
Reservations Required  
Call 361-286-3559

January 30<sup>th</sup>

**Texas Coastal Bend Regional  
Tourism Council  
Travel fair at  
Paws & Taws in Rockport, Tx**

Stop by our booth and say hello!

February 22<sup>nd</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup>  
Whooping Crane Festival  
Port Aransas, Tx

Be sure to stop at our booth!

## ARANSAS LECTURE SERIES

**February 23<sup>rd</sup>** - Program on  
Attwater Greater Prairie  
Chicken History and Update

**March 8<sup>th</sup>** - Program on Aboriginal  
People of Coastal Texas

**April 19<sup>th</sup>** - Program on  
"Aransas Wildflower Walk  
Around the Headquarters  
Area"

**EACH OF THESE  
PROGRAMS WILL BE  
OFFERED AT THE  
REFUGE IN THE  
VISITORS CENTER  
STARTING AT NOON**

Fishing is allowed at the fishing  
pier year round.



For more information on any of  
these events call the  
Refuge at 361-286-3559





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.

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## Membership Application

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zipcode \_\_\_\_\_

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

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