

AMIGO

Aransas & Matagorda Island Guardian/Orator
Winter 2008/2009, Number 11 Volume 1

New Canal Aids Wetlands

BY TARA BOZICK - TBOZICK@VICAD.COM

From the October 17, 2008 Victoria Advocate

PORT LAVACA – who knew a little flooding, could provide a home?

“Flood it and they will come,” Vicki Muller, manager at the Myrtle Foester-Whitmire Unit, said as she opened the water gate from a newly-constructed freshwater canal to flood 50 acres on Thursday. Now she waits for natural vegetation to grow.

The wetlands will cover 750 acres between Foester Lake and Powderhorn Lake in Calhoun County by the time it’s complete, just in time for the wintering whooping cranes and waterfowl.

White ibis birds waded in the nearby wetlands as partners from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority and Guadalupe-Blanco River Trust showed 15 students from the Science and Spanish Club in Travis Middle and Calhoun High schools how the project benefits wildlife.

“We think there’s a lot of opportunity along the coast for wetland restoration, Bill West, GBRA general manager, said. “A lot of property associated with the river needs to be preserved.”

The old 1950s canal system couldn’t get water to fill the wetlands fast enough, which reduced migratory bird habitat, Joe Saenz, assistant manager at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, said.

The Aransas refuge acquired the land, once part of the historic Indianola port area, in 1993 to provide vital habitat. More of that habitat vanished with the decline of rice farming, although one organic rice farmer still harvests his crop from the refuge.

The completion of the 2.65-mile-long canal comes at a crucial time, Chris Pease, regional chief in the Southwest Region for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said.

Grants totaling \$400,000 helped construct the \$600,000 water infrastructure. Pease just returned from visiting the Anahuac and McFaddin Refuges along the upper Texas Gulf Coast, where Hurricane Ike’s storm surge destroyed all the marshes. In aerial surveys, he counted few birds who won’t stop in that traditional spot during migrations. “This year, it’s going to be Myrtle Foester-Whitmire’s turn,” Pease said. “It’s extremely important that this project is in play.”

Miguel A. Gonzalez, a 10th-grader at Calhoun High School, watched the water rush out from the canal to fill the pasture. He helped his father’s friend with rice farming on the same Refuge and understands how to manage water systems.

The Science and Spanish Club president saw first-hand how wildlife flocked to the farms and would like to continue in the field of water management, especially as he knows the importance of conserving habitat and species. “I like to work with science,” he said. “I think it’s important for the world.”



Photo Credit: Tara Bozick

Vicki Muller, Manager Whitmire Unit, opens a water gate so that freshwater from the newly constructed canal could fill wetlands, while students from Travis Middle & Calhoun High schools look on.



Going Back to the 3rd Grade - With Cindi Barrett

With the chaos of the stock market plunge, the excessive cost of gas, Hurricane Ike and the election there hasn't been a lot to smile about lately. But I have to say that I've been very happy lately because I've gone back to the third grade!

Over the summer a friend's daughter, sent an email asking for everyday household items for use in her 3rd grade class at Central Elementary School in South Berwick, Maine. I collected (actually cleaned out) several boxes of items to send to her. Mrs. Bogard (we have to keep it formal for the kid's sake) was looking for new ways to engage the kids while teaching them about habitats, ecosystems, food chains, etc. What better way to learn about those concepts than to learn about Whooping Cranes? I sent her links to the Operation Migration, International Crane Foundation and Journey North websites and another Craniac was hatched! I volunteered to answer her science questions and to send the class post cards as I traveled to Texas for the winter.

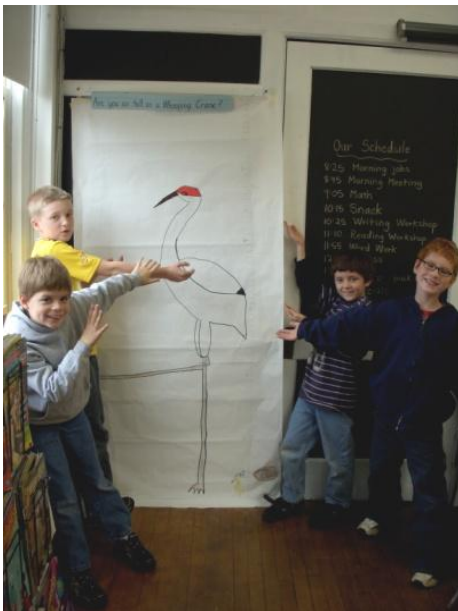
During one of our calls she asked me if I had ever heard of Skype®, a free internet service that allows video teleconferencing using broadband internet services. She uses it to stay in touch with her husband, a pilot with Continental. She thought that if we had a Skype® session with the kids they would be more engaged in learning about cranes. Digging through motor home compartments, I found my old webcam and hooked it up. I could see her, but the sound quality was lacking. One trip to Walmart later, with a new webcam and microphone installed our second test was a success! Clear communications both ways! Ain't technology grand! I was living a StarTrek® moment.



Mrs. Bogard did the ground work with the kids, introducing them to Operation Migration and Whooping Cranes. The school principal developed a special permission slip for the parents to sign, allowing them to Skype® with me. At the end of September we had our first Skype® session. Wow! Was I blown away by the children's questions? What do they eat? What do they do all day? Why had they become endangered?

How fast are Whooping Cranes? They actually stumped me with that last one but fortunately Tom Stehn was able to bail me out. I scheduled my stops where I would have high speed internet service and could Skype® with the kids as I traveled to Texas. When I couldn't have high speed internet service I would send an email letter with pictures. All along my route I continually bought postcards and mailed them to the kids so they could track my migration. On the wall of the classroom they have a map of the United State with my postcards surrounding it.

The class has drawn a life size Whooping Crane for their classroom wall and made life size wings to hang from the ceiling. I've mailed two boxes of books about habitats, ecosystems and Whooping Cranes to the class. They've learned about imprinting, head winds and tail winds as they track the Operation Migration Class of 2008 to Florida. I can safely say that there are now, 22 additional Craniacs in South Berwick, Maine. Many of our Skype sessions end with the "Whooping Crane rock!"



When I arrived in Goliad for my fall volunteer job I didn't have access to high speed internet so I bit the bullet and bought an "air card" for my laptop. Our Skyping® continues every Monday

morning. While I've watched my net worth decline with the market, I can still smile when I Skype® with the kids. Their smiles are infectious, their enthusiasm uplifting!

For my birthday I received a special Skype® session during which they sang three birthday songs. I also received 22 homemade birthday cards with pictures and letters about what they have learned about Whooping Cranes. Each card also had their school picture. Talk about proud unofficial Auntie! They're now moving onto the solar system. This time they are going to teach me using the Skype® session.



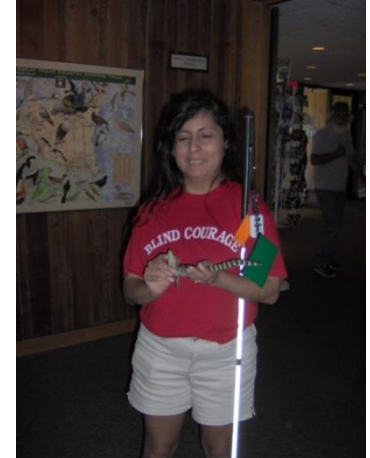
I'm going back to the 3rd grade every Monday morning!

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge Complex Hosts Visually-Impaired Group

Submitted by Bernice Jackson

Earlier this year a group of twelve from South Texas Lighthouse for the Blind and Blind Courage, a community group for the visually-impaired, came out for a Refuge visit. Although most carried white canes, they had varying degrees of sight. Visitor Services staff and volunteers provided an indoor orientation with exhibits, video, and Braille version of the general brochure. The orientation gave an overview of the National Wildlife Refuge System and Aransas NWRC. It emphasized using all senses to enjoy the Refuge. Staff and volunteers passed around items such as animal skins, skulls, feathers, and mounts for visitors to touch. Pictures of birds with accompanying calls were shown on the big screen. A live baby alligator and mud snake were brought out for those who wanted to touch. These visitors utilized binoculars from our Binoculars-On-Loan program to assist themselves in watching the NWRS video. The orientation was so popular, they asked for more things to hear and touch!

Once outdoors, a guided tour on the Auto Tour Loop with stops at the Alligator Viewing Area and Observation Tower was conducted. Outside the Visitor Center, we stopped to smell blooming flowers and feel the scratchy leaf of the Anaqua and tubular flowers of the coralbean. We traveled to the Alligator Viewing Area, with staff and volunteers taking care to notify members of parking curbs, where walkways ended, and the fence they were to stand by. Although only a small section of an alligator was visible, the group was able to take in all the



Visitor enjoys holding a baby alligator.



sounds of the coots, moorhens, red-winged blackbirds, and frogs in the freshwater slough. All enjoyed the stop at Dagger Point Trail to smell crushed redbay leaves. It was exhilarating to walk up the Observation Tower and feel the difference in temperature and the rush of the ocean air as we climbed from the shaded lower ramps to the exposed top platform. Group members enjoyed the wind and warmth of the sun while taking in the panoramic vista of San Antonio Bay and the Intracoastal Waterway. With the help of binoculars and telescopes, many were able to see animals moving and differences in light and dark areas. The group had such a wonderful time at the Refuge, we were told many times "We don't want to leave – we love it here!" It was so rewarding to see the smiles on their faces, we want them back soon. At the end of the day, the group leaders informed us that they might be able to help us obtain listening devices for our Visitor Center exhibits, so we plan to explore that possibility.

Work Day Scheduled

By Carroll Marsh, Projects Coordinator

FAMI and the Refuge are working together to refurbish the picnic area. This area has been closed through the summer because of problems with the septic tank field lines. Those repairs and additional improvements to the restrooms are nearing completion.

In addition the Refuge and FAMI have each purchased nine new picnic tables. They are ADA approved and made of aluminum and recycled plastic, unfortunately they must be put together. I am scheduling a work day for Saturday, November 22, 2008 from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM. There is work for all skill levels, the weather will not be a factor because we can work inside if we need to and FAMI will provide water, lunch and snacks for the day so there are no excuses for not attending.

If you have a 9/16" socket and ratchet or either an open or closed 9/16" wrench please bring them (be sure to mark your tools). Come for a few hours or all day.

Please call Carroll Marsh at 361-645-8746 for more information and to let the cook know how much food to buy.

Alice and Rusty Wainscott volunteered on October 24, 2008 for smoke watch at the prescribed burn on the Taton Unit along Hwy 35 N near the picnic area. Thanks for these wonderful pictures.



The Whooping Cranes Are Coming.

Tom Stehn, Whooping Crane Coordinator expects a record number of approximately 286 cranes to make their way to the Refuge this season.

FAMI Board of Director Vacancies

The FAMI Board of Directors has three vacancies to be filled at the December 6, 2008 General Membership Meeting. The positions to be filled are Vice-President/President Elect, Publications Coordinator and Secretary. The Publications Coordinator and Secretary positions are for two years from December 2009 to December 2011. The Vice-President/President Elect position serves for four years from December 2009 to December 2013, the first two years as Vice-President/President Elect and the last two years as President. The duties of each position are varied but not difficult. The Board generally meets once a month. Anyone interested in more information please contact either member of the Nominating Committee by calling the Refuge at 361-286-3559 for Alice Wainscott or 361-645-8746 for Charla Marsh.

BIG SIT! Report

By Barbara Bruns

To kick-off National Wildlife Refuge Week on Oct. 12th, the 'FAMI Whoopers' participated in a Big Sit birding event at the tower. The team split into shifts throughout the day with 12 participants. They were: Bron Rorex, Peggy Holt, Evelyn Atkinson, Linda & Fred Lanoue, Ginger Hallinan, Maggie Baker, Jan Wimberley, Barbara & Ken Bruns, Claudia Dorn and Sally Rowe.

We were thankful for the sunny day and the enthusiastic group of birdwatchers. I must say that we really had to squeeze out most of the birds reported. The tide was in, not good for migrants and the wind picked up through the day. Ironically, those of us who do the weekly survey knew where the shorebirds were (at Hog & Jones Lake puddles). But, hey, we had a great deal of fun, introduced some of the Refuge visitors to our effort and we ended with one more species than last year - yes, 49 species!!!!

UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER 2008						
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9	10	11	12	13	14	15
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23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

November 22: Aransas Lecture Series program on **Alligators** presented by Norman Hirsch starts at noon.

November 22: FAMI Work Day – Picnic area rehab from 8 am to 4 pm bring your tools and appetite.
Additional details on page 3.

Texas Jr. Duck Stamp Display is on exhibit at the Refuge Visitors Center from now until January 24, 2009.

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.

DECEMBER 2008						
S	M	T	W	Th	F	S
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7	8	9	10	11	12	13
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28	29	30	31			

December 6: Annual membership meeting – Whooping Crane boat tour, good eats and a short business meeting. Members RSVP to 361-286-3559 by November 30, 2008.

December 13: Aransas Lecture Series program on **Whooping Cranes** presented by Ray Kirkwood starts at noon.

December 29: The Refuge will host the 109th Annual **Christmas Bird Count**. Participants will have the opportunity to accompany expert birders and learn how to identify birds by sight, call and habitat. Aransas has one of the highest bird counts for this event in the country. Contact Barbara Bruns at 361-575-5505 or the Refuge at 361-286-3559 for more information.

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FISHING IS CLOSED FROM ALL ACCESS POINTS EXCEPT THE FISHING PIER.

*Thanks for your positive responses to the calendar format for the Upcoming Events section of the newsletter. I am sorry that the placement wasn't what it should have been but maybe I will figure it out eventually.
I appreciate your suggestions and comments, Charla Marsh, Publications Coordinator.*

UPCOMING EVENTS

JANUARY 2009						
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January 24: Aransas Lecture Series presentation and signing of "On Wings of Cranes" by author, Dr. Lowell Schake starts at noon.

January 28: Look for the Refuge booth at the **Coastal Bend Travel Fair** in Rockport, Texas.

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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.

FEBRUARY 2009						
S	M	T	W	Th	F	S
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22	23	24	25	26	27	28

February 21: Aransas Lecture Series program **Red Tide** by TPWD Biologist, Meredith Byrd.

February 26 – March 1: Celebration of Whooping Cranes and other Birds in Port Aransas, Texas.

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.

Fishing is closed from all access points except the fishing pier.

Our membership year is from October 1st to September 30th. Please renew your membership so this is not your last AMIGO!

Our Website Is Coming! Our Website Is Coming!

Thanks to an Outreach grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) we will launch our website in the next few weeks. The tentative address is www.friendsofaransas.org.

New FAMI Membership Card

You will begin receiving your 2008-2009 FAMI membership cards during December. A new feature of the card is a unique identification code on the back. When you present your card the volunteer will scan it and the cash register will automatically generate the 15% discount on your FAMI Nature Store purchases. If you forget your card tell the volunteer you are a FAMI member to get your discount.



Texas Wildlife Refuges Severely Impacted by Hurricane Ike

Excerpts from USFWS Updated of 11/4/08

The Texas Chenier Plain NWR Complex, which includes McFaddin, Texas Point, Anahuac, and Moody NWR, sustained a direct hit from Hurricane Ike on September 13, 2008. Almost all facilities were destroyed or significantly impacted from the storm. As a result, public activities on these refuges have been modified or suspended.

Texas Point NWR opened for public access on November 1st, 2008, the Mud Bayou Hunt Unit on McFaddin NWR has reopened for the regular waterfowl season; however, all other portions of McFaddin NWR remain closed to the public at this time, Anahuac NWR remains closed to all public activities at this time and portions of McFaddin and Anahuac NWR are expected to reopen in the coming weeks. Please check back for updated information on refuge openings.

"Risk to public safety is the main reason portions of the Complex remain closed," said Tim Cooper, Project Leader for the Complex. "Roads have been washed clean of gravel, bridges have been washed out, and hazardous debris litters refuge waterways. Once roads are repaired and storm debris from navigable waterways has been removed or marked, we will begin to open units of the refuge."

In addition to the extensive damage to facilities, the sensitive wildlife habitats these refuges manage and protect were damaged significantly. Debris from the storm litters the refuges, including oil and gas infrastructure that pose specific hazards.

The most significant impact Ike had on refuge habitats and wildlife came in the form of saltwater. Freshwater marshes, woodlots, rice fields and moist soil units were completely inundated by the Gulf of Mexico. The extent and magnitude of the storm's impacts on these freshwater communities will ultimately depend upon the amount and timing of rainfall in the coming months.

Refuge wildlife has suffered significant mortality and continues to suffer from the lack of freshwater. Impacts to migratory and resident wildlife will not be completely known for some time.

For more information on the status of the refuges, please contact the Complex headquarters at 409-267-3337 or look for updates at the US Fish & Wildlife website at <http://southwest.fws.gov/refuges/texas/anahuac/index.html> or the Friends of Anahuac Refuge website at www.friendsofanahuacnwr.org.

FAMI has set up a relief fund to benefit the FWS employees affected by Hurricane Ike. As many as eight families from Refuges along the Texas and Louisiana Gulf Coast have sustained serious losses to their homes and property. If you are interested in making a donation you can send a check payable to Friends of Aransas & Matagorda Island to P O Box 74, Austwell, TX 77950 be sure to write Hurricane Ike Fund in the memo section of your check.



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 30th each year.**

Make checks payable to:

Friends of Aransas & Matagorda Island

Mail to: P. O. Box 74

Austwell, Texas 77950