The Ocelot Observer

A Newsletter of the Friends of
South Texas National Wildlife Refuges

WINTER 2011-2012

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What's this? Scan it with your smart phone and find out what is happening on your National Wildlife Refuges!

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Santa Ana NWR and Viva the Ocelot!

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Manager's Message

by Jennifer Owen-White

Refuge Manager,

Santa Ana NWR

It has been just one year since I took over as refuge manager for the beautiful Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge and I can truly say it has been the most exciting, demanding and rewarding experience of my professional life. Ever since I moved to the valley seven years ago I have had a very special love for Santa Ana and being given the opportunity to turn that love into my career has been just remarkable.

The year has not been all Green Jays and Roseate Skimmers however, there have certainly been challenges. On my very first day on the job I went out to explore my new domain and made it only ten feet south of the levee. That's where the water began. I took over a refuge that was almost completely submerged! But I wasn't discouraged, I couldn't wait to see what wonders were revealed as the water receded. And as the flood waters diminished my excitement grew.

Over the past year I have met some of the most incredibly dedicated staff, volunteers and friends group members. Together we dreamed big things for the Santa Ana and Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuges. Many of these imaginings have come true; many more are visions still waiting to happen.

For this reason, I am even more excited about this coming year. The refuge and its wildlife are recovering nicely from the blows dealt by the flood and subsequent drought. Visitation is rising steadily and new audiences are being reached. More programs are being offered and more people are discovering why Santa Ana is the "Jewel of the National Wildlife Refuge System". I can not wait to see what 2012 has in store and I hope that you will join me on this new adventure. Together we can make Santa Ana a better place for the wildlife it protects and the people it serves.

Proud to be your Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge Manager,

Thank You, Walmart!

Thanks to the hard work of former Friends of the Wildlife Corridor Grant Writer Robert Affeldt, three local Walmart stores, one Sam's Club and the Walmart Foundation all made donations to the Friends of the Wildlife Corridor.

Walmart Store #429
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VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: Jane and Ken Clapper, Santa Ana volunteers

How long have you been volunteering and what were some of those places?

Jane: About 14 yrs, we actually started at Santa Ana in '97 and stayed through '99,in between we went to Aransas Pass NWR, Kartchner Caverns in Arizona and now we're back here at Santa Ana again!

What have you liked most about volunteering at Santa Ana?

Jane: Working with staff and learning new things pretty much every day.
Ken: Working in Revege and doing field work and also meeting people from all over the world.

You must love wildlife, what is your favorite animal to see?

Jane: Deer.
Ken: At Aransas NWR I liked exciting things like cats (bobcats, mountain lions), but really any kind of wildlife in its natural habitat is good to see.

What is one thing that separates our refuge (SANWR) from any other wildlife area that you have volunteered in?

Jane: Bird diversity is amazing here and nothing compares to the birding experience here.

This winter Ken and Jane spent time making sure the gardens and ponds around the Visitor Center at Santa Ana were in great condition for the wildlife and visitors.

National Wildlife Refuge Week Draws People Out

Marion Mason, Park Ranger, Laguna Atascosa NWR

Refuge week was held October 9 -15, 2011 and will be held October 14 – 20, 2012

The refuges offered many free programs in celebration of National Wildlife Refuge Week. These programs were a sampler of what the refuges offer to the public throughout the year and included kayaking the Laguna Madre, bird walks and tours, as well as a Family Fish Camp, tour of the South Texas Refuges Complex and Kid's Day at Santa Ana.

The goal of Refuge Week is to make people aware of the National Wildlife Refuge System , its mission and what refuges have to offer visitors. Local TV reporter , Richard Moore, included a spot in his weekly broadcast, and visitation numbers went up likely as a result.

The South Texas Refuges want to connect people with nature, and have them support us in our conservation mission. This week of events was a big step toward that goal.

Local families participated in the Family Fishing Camp put on by Laguna Atascosa at Adolph Thomae Jr County Park.

Fun Fact: Adoplph Thomae Jr County Park is actually on Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge!

Laguna Atascosa offered FREE kayak tours as a part of National Wildlife Refuge Week. If you missed out, make sure to keep an eye out for the fun and free activities offered this coming year October 14 – 20, 2012!

2011-2012 Hunt Program Summary

Thad A. Williams
Wildlife Refuge Specialist
Santa Ana NWR Assistant Refuge Manager
LRGV Hunt Coordinator

The LRGV NWR Hunting program is thriving this year just as it has been for the past several years. The LRGV and Laguna Atascosa NWR's offer the greatest public hunting opportunities available in South Texas. These public hunting programs allow the average individual to enjoy a high-quality and affordable hunting experience that would otherwise be unattainable without significant financial means. Given the current high interest levels for public hunting opportunities and the very low availability for public hunting within the region, South Texas Refuges will continue to strive to improve its public hunting program and utilize this important wildlife management tool to maintain healthy and sustainable populations of wildlife for years to come.

Besides using public hunting to maintain healthy populations of native game animals such as whitetail deer and mourning dove, the hunting program also helps control invasive animals such as feral hogs and Nilgai antelope.

LRGV NWR added an Exotic Only Youth Hunt to its hunting dates this season. This hunt is designed to encourage youth involvement in hunting, the outdoors, and conservation activities in general, while also assisting the refuge in its control of exotic animal species (hogs and Nilgai) that degrade refuge habitats and compete with native wildlife.

Overall public satisfaction with the refuge hunting program remains very high as is shown in the Harvest Reports required to be submitted by any permitted hunters. While many hunters do not harvest game while hunting on the refuge, they enjoy the opportunity of getting outside, observing wildlife behavior in its natural setting, and the overall hunting experience.

HUNT TYPES 2011-2012 Season

Archery
Shotgun/Muzzleloader
216 Hunting Permits Issued
50 Hunting Permits Issued
401 Hunter Applications
341 Hunter Applications

Exotic Only Hunt (Rifle)
50 Hunting Permits Issued
380 Hunter Applications

Youth Hunt (Regular)
40 Permits Issued
131 Hunter Applications

Youth Hunt (Exotic Only)
19 Permits Issued
73 Hunter Applications

WILDLIFE FACT Texas Indigo Snake (*Drymarchon erebennus*)

by Gilbert Martinez, STEP Student, Visitor Services, Santa Ana NWR

Everything is bigger in Texas! The Texas Indigo snake is the longest snake in Texas and tied with its Florida relative, the Eastern Indigo, for the longest snake in North America. This massive serpent reaches lengths of up to 8 feet and weighs in at 6 pounds.

A powerful predator, this snake eats anything large enough to get its attention, including venomous snakes. Its preferred choice of prey though are rodents, who cause millions of dollars in destruction each year, so Indigos are a valuable ally in the fight against mice and rats.

Although its large size may intimidate the nature enthusiast, or any other person for that matter, this non-venomous snake is harmless. Its first move when it spots humans is to dash to the nearest hole or groundcover.

This snake is protected by the State of Texas, so it's illegal to kill or collect this creature. Its large size and active life style means that this snake needs lots of undisturbed habitat in order to survive. The indigo's numbers are declining due to habitat fragmentation, roadway casualties and senseless persecution by humans.

We must help protect our remaining thorn scrub forest and mesquite plains in South Texas so that this impressive and iconic Texas snake doesn't ride off into the sunset, never to be seen again.

In December 2011 Gilbert Martinez accepted a full time position as the Naturalist at the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands. He will be leading bird walks, nature walks and more. Stop by and see him and join one of his walks, it is sure to be a good time.

Congratulations Gilbert,

Santa Ana will miss you!

Rio Reforestation XX

by Bob Barry, Revegetation Program Managert

The morning of October 1, 2011 was a perfect day for the 20th anniversary of Rio Reforestation. The air was cool, but not cold with a light breeze. The 14.2-acre field had been irrigated the week prior, so the ground was moist but not too wet. Crates full of plants had been laid out the day before and everything was ready. By 8:00 am the school buses began arriving, and by 9:00 am the field was full of groups planting seedlings

In all, about 14,000 seedlings of 28 different species were planted by about 650 volunteers. The majority of the planting was completed by 10:30 am due to the small size of the field and the large number of volunteers who donated their Saturday morning to assist with our habitat restoration program.

In addition to the planting, there were lots of hands-on educational activities at the tents. The Valley Nature Center brought several live snakes and several pelts of endangered species for kids to touch. Trash-to-Treasure artwork was displayed. Packs of native plant seeds were distributed.

This event was the first planting of the year, with more than 440,000 seedlings to be planted on about 515 acres. The remaining plantings will be accomplished with the assistance of cooperating farmers who rent refuge lands and farm them until ready for restoration plantings. With more than 7,400 acres of actively farmed croplands, it will take the refuge another 15-20 years to get all of it planted.

Next year's event is still in the planning stages. Stay tuned.

The Status of Game Populations on the South Texas National Wildlife Refuges

by Thad "Drew" Williams, Wildlife Refuge Specialist/Assistant Refuge Manager

Population estimates of current game populations of deer, hogs, and Nilgai antelope on our south Texas refuges are difficult to obtain. The methodology and techniques required to gain accurate estimates of population size are very labor intensive and costly. However, based on hunter harvest and observation reports from previous years and the present year, the overall deer numbers appear to be stable or growing. This has further been confirmed by refuge staff and refuge law enforcement observations in the field. Even with the current drought conditions our deer appear to be healthy and in fair to good condition. I would expect that fawn production this coming spring and summer will be lower as is typical with deer that are surviving under environmental stress (that is, drought).

Feral hog numbers appear to have declined slightly due to the effects of the drought, which is probably a result of their high requirements for fresh water. But hog numbers can and will recover quickly with any amounts of significant rainfall.

Sandhill Cranes over the Teniente tract

Hogs reproductive capacity is the highest of any large mammal on the planet. Their population can nearly triple every six months under the right environmental conditions.

Nilgai antelope numbers appear to be stable or increasing. Nilgai are very drought tolerant because they evolved in relatively arid climates in their native range of India and Pakistan.

Sunrise on the Teniente tract

Entrance to the East Lake tract

Families enjoy the Youth Hunt on LRGV's East Lake Tract

Rick Ramke, Friend of the Wildlife Corridor Board Member

These are some of the father-son participants of the Youth Hunt at the East Lake tract on the weekend of December 3 and 4, 2011.

(Pictures used by permission.)

Joe Garcia and son Jonathan
Mission, Texas

Rusty Shriver and son Forrest
Harlingen, Texas

George Slagle, Jr. and son Toby
Kerrville, Texas

Salt Cedar Threatens Natural Diversity

Kim Wahl, Plant Ecologist, Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR

Tamarix, a federally listed noxious weed, has taken root in the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Two species of *Tamarix* are currently of high concern for the Refuge, *Tamarix ramosissima* (salt cedar) and *Tamarix aphylla* (Athel salt cedar). Both of these species are detrimental to native habitats and native wildlife and are high water consumers. *Tamarix* is a problematic species on many watersheds throughout many of the southwestern states. During the summer of 2010, major flooding impacted nearly 17,000 acres of refuge property. Subsequently, salt cedar spread to many of those acres. Beginning in October 2010, extensive work has occurred on the refuge to map and treat *Tamarix.*

Although *Tamarix* was present before the flooding of 2010, prior surveys revealed that only about 1,500 individuals were present and the populations were not increasing. However, the flood event dispersed seeds throughout all areas impacted by the flooding and created the perfect soil conditions for germination to occur. Extensive surveys were completed after flood waters receded and sites began to dry out. These surveys revealed that all 34 LRGVNWR tracts that were affected by the flooding had new populations of *Tamarix*, and these populations totaled into the millions of new seedlings.

In response, the Fish and Wildlife Service has been investing many hours into the control of *Tamarix.* This work has included hand removal, backpack spraying with herbicides, cutting and stump treating with herbicides, and bulldozer work to remove dense, mature stands of salt cedar. This work has been done with the involvement of many staff members of the LRGVNWR, interns, volunteers, and detailers from the National Park Service, Forestry Service, and other National Wildlife Refuges. The refuge also had help from two different teams of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps, Youth Conservation Corps, and an American Conservation Experience Crew.

With the help of these temporary crews and the dedication of Refuge staff, over 650 acres of Refuge land has been treated during the past year. This includes the removal of all seedlings and saplings of *Tamarix*, with densities as high as 3,500 *Tamarix* plants per acre, and cut stump treatments of over 300 mature trees.

Americorps volunteers along with many other staff and volunteer groups from around the country helped remove *Tamarix* on LRGV tracts.

Santa Ana Tram Update

Tim Gallagher, Volunteer Tram Interpreter, Santa Ana NWR

The Nature Tram at Santa Ana NWR is in full operation once again! Santa Ana's interpretive Nature Tram is a great way to obtain a concept of the overall layout of the entire refuge. Families have discovered that the Santa Ana Nature Tram is a great experience to share together. The ninety minute tour makes a circle through the refuge to give riders an introduction to this special place called Santa Ana. Included in the tour is a short history of the habitat changes that have taken place throughout the Rio Grande Valley and what the US Fish and Wildlife Service is doing, both at Santa Ana and the Lower Rio Grande Valley, in response to the changes. Tram riders have an opportunity to take some short walks to explore the old cemetery and to see the Rio Grande. Also included in the tour is a brief history of the people of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. A discussion of wildlife includes those animals frequently found on the refuge, as well as those that are seen less often or perhaps not at all anymore. A tram tour is a great way to see the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System in providing and protecting habitat for wildlife in viable and practical ways. Folks have a great time beginning their visit of Santa Ana with a ride on the Nature Tram and with a little luck may even catch a glimpse of a bobcat! Tram tours are offered every day at 9:30am, noon and 2pm (small fee applies).

Keep an eye out for the next version of The Ocelot Observer to be published in late April.

Have a great Spring – Enjoy YOUR South Texas National Wildlife Refuges and share them with your friends and family.