



WHEELER WILDLIFE WATCH

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID YOUNG

REFUGE INFORMATION KIOSK

Visitor Center Entrance

Refuge maps and information are available for visitors at a self-serve Refuge Information Kiosk located outside the front gate of the Visitor Center during the construction closure, March - October 2022.

WHEELER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Calendar of Events

April 2022 - June 2022

VISITOR CENTER
256.350.6639

KAYAK FLINT CREEK

Saturday, May 14, 9 AM

Saturday, June 18, 9 AM

Registration opens April 11

Space is limited.

To reserve your spot please call
256-350-6639, M - F, 9 - 4.

The refuge naturalist-led kayak will traverse part of the Flint Creek Canoe Trail. We'll paddle 1 - 1.5 miles together roundtrip, stopping at several points exploring wildlife and plants whose survival revolves around water.

- Bring your own canoe/kayak, paddles, and lifejackets
- Bring plenty of water and a snack if you wish.
- Wear a hat, sunscreen, insect repellent, lifejacket.
- Basic paddling skills and wearing lifejackets are required.
- Call for more details.



Photo courtesy of Justin Powell

WHEELER VISITOR CENTER RENOVATIONS

The Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center will be closed to the public March 13 - October 31 while contractors renovate the Visitor Center and Observation Building.

Starting March 13, 2022, and continuing through the duration of construction, the entire Visitor Center Road and access will be closed to all visitors. This includes the Visitor Center building, grounds, parking lot, Observation Building, and Atkeson Cypress Boardwalk.

During this closure, environmental education and group visits to the refuge will not be scheduled, allowing refuge staff and contractors

the flexibility needed to safely complete as much of the construction as possible before next winter's peak visitation, when the cranes and waterfowl are present. In addition, the Beaverdam Swamp Boardwalk in Madison remains closed as crews continue to rebuild the boardwalk. For your own safety, please do not enter these construction sites. Construction on the Flint Creek Trail should be completed by April 15.

During the Visitor Center closure, the refuge will not operate an in-person visitor contact station. Refuge information, maps, and trail guides
RENOVATIONS cont'd on page 4...

SPRING...WITNESSING THE WONDER OF BIRD MIGRATION AT WNWR

By Dwight Cooley, Refuge Volunteer & WWR Board Member

Scientists estimate that over five billion birds migrate across North America each season. Wheeler NWR is a haven for migratory birds. Each year, millions of birds migrate to or through the Refuge. While we do not know the exact number of migrants the Refuge supports, we can get a feel for the magnitude of migration by gauging the diversity of migratory species that use the Refuge. Of the 300+ bird species that have occurred on the Refuge, 262 species or 87%, are migratory in at least a part of their range.

When we talk about bird migration, everyone knows what we mean. *But what is migration?* Migration is defined as movement from one place to another. In birds, we generally think of migration as the seasonal movement of large numbers of birds from one place to another and then returning. In reality, bird migration is much more complicated. It is not an all-or-none proposition. For instance, every American Robin that nests in North America and their surviving offspring do not migrate in the fall to a wintering area in the southern United States or Mexico. While a majority of them do, a few will linger across the northern United States. In fact, robins that nest at Wheeler NWR will often remain in the area during the winter and their numbers will be augmented by robins migrating from more northern areas. Many migratory birds exhibit this migratory behavior.

In general, there are three types of migration: Birds that migrate during the day are known as **diurnal migrants**. These birds are usually strong fliers that can travel long distances each day. Some birds, like ducks and geese, do not feed while flying. Once they find suitable habitat at the end of the day, they will often feed late in the evening, through the night and during the early morning before continuing their migration. Other birds such as swallows and swifts capture food in flight as they migrate during the day. **Nocturnal migrants**, such as warblers and sparrows, travel during the night and must feed during the day. Most small birds that migrate are nocturnal migrants. **Altitudinal migrants** move from high elevations to lower elevations and back. Western species such as Clark's Nutcracker, Steller's Jay, and Arizona Woodpecker move down slope in the fall to escape the harsh winters in the high mountains. While only a few North American birds are altitudinal migrants, scientists estimate that a fifth all tropical birds in the Central American highlands are altitudinal migrants.

The peak of bird migration is here. Get your binoculars and get out in the woods!



Diurnal Migrant: Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*



Nocturnal Migrant: Scarlet Tanager, *Piranga olivacea*



Altitudinal Migrant: American Robin, *Turdus migratoris*

Photos courtesy of USFWS

Flint Creek Boardwalk Almost Finished!



Refuge Manager Ricky Ingram does an inspection of the new Flint Creek Boardwalk with a USFWS Architect and PCI Representative.

Photo courtesy of Drew Wirwa.

THEY'RE BACK!

By Tom Ress, Refuge Volunteer & WURA Board Member

One of the first signs of spring is the return of ospreys to the refuge. These raptors, sometimes called fish hawks, are large birds with an almost



Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*

six foot wingspan. They are dramatic looking birds with dark brown upper parts, a white lightly streaked breast and white underwings and body and a white head with a dark mask across the eyes.

Unlike most of the ducks, geese and cranes that migrate to Wheeler in the fall and depart in late winter, ospreys do a diametrically opposite migration, leaving for Central and South America in late summer and returning to Wheeler to breed and nest in late winter. So they fill the hole left by the departure of the waterfowl, a summertime boon for area birders.

There are at least five active osprey nests on the refuge, three of them are easily visible on the three electrical towers in Flint Creek on the south side of Highway 67, just east of the Visitor Center.

Ospreys feed almost exclusively on fish so they nest around bodies of water and the towers in Flint Creek are perfect bases for their nests. They use the same nests from year to year, adding more nesting material each year and some of the older nests can be huge. Two of the Flint Creek nests have been in use for a number of years but the westernmost nest nearest the Visitor Center has only been active for the last few seasons.

The ospreys on the Flint Creek nests are refurbishing their nests as you read this in early March. They will lay eggs in April and the young will hatch 5-6 weeks later. Summer is a time of feeding and growth and by September the young are mature enough to migrate and they will join the adults on their southern migration.

You can get good looks at the nests in Flint Creek from the Osprey Point boat launch ramp. Get out and enjoy the ospreys while they are here!



Photos courtesy of Tom Ress



CONGRATULATIONS

Grace He, 17 years old

Auburn, Alabama

FULVOUS WHISTLING-DUCK

2022 Best of Show

Alabama Federal

Junior Duck Stamp Art Contest



Prothonotary Warbler
Protonotaria citrea
Photo courtesy of USFWS

National Wildlife Refuge Associations are independent non-profit organizations whose mission is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries that secure its ecological integrity. Won't you please join us?

RENOVATIONS cont'd from page 1...

will be available at the information kiosk located outside the Visitor Center gate off the south side of Highway 67. Visitors needing further assistance should call the refuge at (256) 350-6639 Monday-Friday, 9:00am - 4:00pm.

Visitor Center and Observation Building renovations are part of a larger project to improve visitor amenities at the refuge. This includes rehabilitating refuge boardwalks, building a new wildlife photography blind, building an outdoor classroom, adding a canoe launch at Dancy Bottoms trail, constructing a new multi-use five-mile trail near the Visitor Center, and replacing Visitor Center exhibits.

Replacement of the Visitor Center exhibits will likely not be completed until early 2023 after the Visitor Center has reopened. We appreciate everyone's patience as we construct these visitor enhancements as safely and efficiently as possible.



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WHEELER WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 239

DECATUR, ALABAMA 35603

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Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association

<http://www.friendsofwheelernwr.org>

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