



WHEELER WILDLIFE WATCH

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association



PHOTO COURTESY
OF
TOM RESS

NEW WILDLIFE PHOTO BLIND!

Construction Updates!

The Wildlife Photography Blind as seen from a crane's point of view...the architect added faux-camera lenses to the exterior of the building as an added touch. The new walkway to the blind is completed and both are open for visitors!

WHEELER NATIONAL
WILDLIFE REFUGE

Calendar of Events

Winter 2023

VISITOR CENTER
256.350.6639

Festival of the Cranes

January 13 -15, 2023

See scheduled events on page 4 and details at friendsofwheelernwr.org

Winter Opportunities at Wheeler NWR

Even though the Visitor Center is currently closed for renovations, there are still plenty of opportunities on Wheeler NWR. Many of the refuge's roads are closed to vehicular traffic beginning October 15 and reopening February 10, but here are some great options:

- The Observation Building, Atkeson Cypress Trail and new Airport Road Trail are open
- Waterfowl Wednesdays (Page 3)
- Walk the newly completed Beaverdam Swamp Boardwalk in Madison
- Canoe or kayak Limestone Bay via the Arrowhead Landing boat launch
- Ride bicycles on White Springs Dike
- Go fishing and walk the trail at the Flint Creek Day Use Area
- Trail guides, hunting permits, gate schedules and maps are all available at www.fws.gov/wheeler/library

Notice: Visitor Center grounds will be closed Christmas Eve & Day and New Year's Eve and Day...

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK...*Mary Lee Ratliff*

I mainly try to keep up with technology as it's fascinating to watch the rapid transition of manual production of anything to automation. With artificial intelligence you don't even have to possess a modicum of talent— you just need to know how to manipulate the process.

A person can now publish computer generated art, music, and literature that is almost indistinguishable from an accomplished expert in any of those fields. That is absolutely incredible, and even more so since AI is basically in its infancy. In the near future, no one will know who produced what, especially written, pictorial, and video content.

What I do emphatically know right now is that humans cannot replicate nature as it was gifted to us. That's long gone. It's why our refuge system (long regarded as the best in the world) was primarily established. We had to try to reverse the man-made damage arbitrarily enacted in the name of progress. Our mission now is to convince people to put aside their electronically generated entertainment and sedentary lifestyles, and revert back to the stand-by activity of "going outside" just because it is simply good for everyone.

That's why our Festival of the Cranes engages the finest environmental
Prez's Corner cont'd on Page 6...

HOMERS, VISITORS, RESIDENTS & A FEW THOUSAND CRANES!

by Nick Wirwa, WNCNR Wildlife Biologist

Once abundant winter visitor at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge is observed in very few numbers these days. Although most people know and have observed the Canada goose, many don't realize there are different stocks of these birds. The Canada geese that once were very abundant at Wheeler are a part of the Ontario, Canada Southern James Bay Population, a certain group of geese that migrate to and breed there. It is now clear that almost all of Wheeler's "homers" or early arrivals, once came from the Bay's Akimiski (A-gam'-ski) Island in the early half of the waterfowl season i.e., prior to December 15. They were the dependable birds at Wheeler. The "visitors" are generally those geese of the now-temperate breeding population that come later in the season, after December 15, and more particularly during periods of extreme cold and or snow cover.



Photo Courtesy of George Lee

Wheeler's goose flock peaked in the early to mid-60s at 58,000 and averaged 30,000 until 1989. Since then the refuge flock has taken a drastic nose dive, from the 30,000s to lows of less than 1,000. Even more dramatic is that it is assumed that most of the wintering geese at Wheeler do not originate from the James Bay region anymore, but migrate locally.

So what happened to the population and why has nothing changed or gotten better? About 1984, the USFWS began a program of neck collaring Canada geese using varicolored plastic collars with numbers readable using spotting scopes. The different colors identify birds of different flocks, breeding grounds, and wintering grounds. Information obtained from these collar observations has provided more detailed information on breeding grounds, migratory flights and wintering grounds. Coupled with band returns and harvest data, the USFWS provides really good information on their current population status and winter distribution. In an effort to reevaluate goose population management and changes in goose populations and distribution, The Mississippi Flyway Council, the organization that is responsible for coordinating waterfowl management and setting

regulation guidelines in the Mississippi Valley, finalized a more comprehensive and adaptive plan in 2017. The council now recognizes three distinct stocks instead of five: temperate-breeding, subarctic-breeding, and arctic-breeding. The former Southern James Bay population is now grouped and managed with the subarctic-breeding geese.

We do know that the wintering population decline has occurred throughout the wintering range, not just on Wheeler NWR. Other areas and states have also seen dramatic changes in their wintering Canada goose populations. The Mississippi Valley Population (MVP) of Canada geese used to migrate to southern Illinois and eastern Missouri. Now, MVP geese typically stop in Wisconsin and northern Illinois without ever making it to their traditional wintering grounds. Even the James Bay area of Ontario has a seemingly healthy population of Canada geese on the mainland, but these do not migrate to Alabama and Tennessee. Another complicating factor is the increase in the lower latitude population, the Temperate Breeding Population, that breeds mostly in the U.S. This stock, called "resident" birds by some, are becoming more common around golf courses, farm fields, and in urban neighborhoods. It's impossible to tell just by looking at a flock of geese from a distance if they are from a sub-arctic breeding population in Canada, or if they are temperate-breeding birds produced locally in North Alabama and the surrounding states.

As with most migratory bird populations, the continental Canada goose population has fluctuated over the century both in population size and distribution. Interestingly, as the Southern James Bay Canada goose population has shifted over the years, other migratory species have exponentially increased on Wheeler NWR. Since 2008, more sandhill cranes winter on the refuge than geese. According to the USFWS, over the past two decades, the eastern population of sandhill cranes has increased in size and distribution, leading to wintering populations at Wheeler NWR exceeding 20,000 individuals. In contrast, during the early 2000s, fewer than 300 cranes would be observed on the refuge. The population has become so significant that the refuge is now recognized as an important sandhill crane wintering area and receives numerous visitors from around the U.S. who come to observe and photograph these birds. The refuge participates with the Friends of Wheeler NWR, the City of Decatur, local businesses, and the International Crane Foundation to host an annual crane festival. These large, beautiful birds along with endangered whooping cranes can be easily observed at the refuge's visitor center, observation building and newly constructed photo blind.

CRANES, CROPS & WATER DROPS

by Jessie Taylor, Whooping Crane Outreach Program Assistant, International Crane Foundation

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge is a hotspot for many winter migratory water birds. Arguably, the most impressive of these birds are the two North American crane species, the Sandhill Crane and the endangered Whooping Crane. Sandhill Cranes stand at 4 feet tall, are a light gray color, and have a red forehead patch with a white cheek. Whooping Cranes, however, are North America's tallest flying bird standing at 5 feet tall. They are white with black wingtips and have a red forehead patch that extends into a black mustache on their cheeks.

On average, North Alabama will see around 20,000 Sandhill Cranes and only around 18 Whooping Cranes each year. When cranes are not in Alabama, they will spend their breeding season throughout Wisconsin and the Great Lakes region. Since the early 2000s, cranes have established a migratory route from Wisconsin that stops at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. This raises the question, what makes Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge the perfect wintering environment for cranes?

The answer is the abundance of wetland habitat and ample food sources that provide a consistent environment for the cranes from October through March. This wetland environment is made possible by localized water level management by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).



Photo courtesy of George Lee

Since crane migration coincides with the rainy season in Alabama, the TVA will lower the water levels in the Tennessee River by about 5 feet to combat the potential of flooding. As a result, ideal wetland conditions and gradually sloping muddy banks are created which provide foraging and nightly roosting habitat for cranes. Cranes often go from foraging and roosting in these wetland habitats to foraging in agricultural fields. Another way that Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge provides great wintering area for cranes is through a cooperative farming agreement. This agreement between farmers and the Refuge System is highly regulated and allows farmers to use refuge land to grow crops including wheat, milo, soybeans, corn and millet. Under this agreement, 20% of the yield of these crops must be left unharvested for the benefit of wildlife. The refuge staff dictates which crops are grown in certain plots, what pesticides are allowed, and where the 20% of yield is to remain on the refuge.

The most widely used crops by cranes on the refuge are corn, milo, and millet. The corn fields surrounding Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge's visitor center and observation building attract large numbers of cranes each day during their wintering season. Wintering cranes in both wetlands and agricultural fields will take advantage of Alabama's biodiversity and eat crawfish, frogs, snakes, bugs, the roots of plants, leftover grain crops, and more. The sheer amount of food availability, undisturbed habitat, and lack of human interference makes these buildings some of the best places in the country to view endangered Whooping Cranes and Sandhill Cranes.

We encourage you to make the trip to Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge this winter to view the cranes and to enjoy Alabama's diverse native plants, animals, and habitats. When viewing wildlife, please be respectful of an animal's space and sensitivity to disturbance. It is best practice to stay at least 200 yards away from wildlife and stay on designated trails. Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge is 35,000 acres of prime wintering habitat for many migratory birds. Current land management practices will ensure that wintering birds will have a safe haven during migration for many years to come. For current trail closures and updates, please visit www.fws.gov/refuge/wheeler.



Great Blue Heron
Ardea herodias
Photo courtesy of George Lee

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?

Prez's Corner cont'd from Page 1...

educators to personally present programs that not only help enlighten the public, but also try to nudge you toward developing an emotional and physical attraction to the outdoors. If you love something, you will care for it. As the NatGeo Explorer Buddy Powell states, "The best conservationists are the ones with the most precious childhood memories". We hope you and your families fall in love with Wheeler every single time you step foot over the protected imaginary boundary that separates our unprotected soil, water and wildlife. It's an obligation we should willingly undertake to create those memories!

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL PARK PASSES & FEDERAL DUCK STAMPS

Even though the Visitor Center is closed, you can still buy a Federal Duck Stamp or an America The Beautiful Federal Recreation Lands Pass. Refuge rangers are making appointments with people on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Call 256-350-6639 to make an appointment.



WHEELER WILDLIFE WATCH
WHEELER WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION
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VISIT OUR WEBSITES!

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge
<http://www.fws.gov/wheeler/>

Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/WheelerNWRComplex/>

Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association
<http://www.friendsofwheelernwr.org>

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<https://www.facebook.com/Wheeler-Wildlife-Refuge-Association-WWRA-1697491543825297>



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It's the same Amazon.com you know—same products, same prices—and 0.5% of each purchase price is donated back to WWRA. And it doesn't cost you anything! On your first visit to AmazonSmile (smile.amazon.com), you will be prompted to select a charitable organization from a list of eligible organizations. Just type in **Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association**, search, select, and you're finished! Now when you shop, go to **smile.amazon.com** and you will be generating donations to your refuge.

Go ahead and mark your calendars now:
The 11th annual Festival of the Cranes is just a couple of
weeks away, and we think it will be the best one yet!

Festival of the Cranes

January 13-15, 2023



Schedule of events at: www.friendsofwheelernwr.org



Presenters

Andrew Orr
Joe Duff
Richard Beilfuss
George Archibald
Christopher Joe
Timothy Joe
Dwight Cooley
Steve Trash
Jimmy Stiles



Alabama Center for the Arts

Princess Theatre

Decatur Public Library

Delano Park

Cook Museum of Natural Science

Carnegie Visual Arts Center

Old State Bank

Wheeler NWR Grounds



Special Speakers

Wildlife Art Exhibits

Concert by Three on a String

Plein Air Art Demonstrations

Children's Activities and Crafts

Raptor Show by Wings to Soar

Wildlife Watching and Birding Walks

Family Environmental Science Show



If you want to learn more about migrating waterfowl, this is a great way to do it. Knowledgeable birders will be delighted to help you learn more about our winged winter visitors!

Waterfowl Wednesdays



December 7
December 21
January 4
January 18
February 1
February 15

Guided bird walking-tours will take place around the Visitor Center and Observation Building where you could see a variety of ducks, geese, cranes and other waterfowl.

- No reservations are required -
- Meet outside the Visitor Center at 8:00 AM -
- Bring binoculars and dress for the weather -
- Tours will last 1-2 hours -

*This program provided by Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge
in partnership with the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association.*



Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association

- The Friends of Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge -



**NATIONAL
WILDLIFE
REFUGE SYSTEM**