



WHEELER WILDLIFE WATCH

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association



PHOTO COURTESY
OF
DAVID YOUNG

OUTDOOR CLASSROOM PROGRESS!

Construction Updates!

Progress is being made on a new outdoor classroom that will be used for environmental education while the Visitor Center recently received a fresh coat of paint. Inside renovations continue. The reopening date for the facility is dependent on construction progress. Visit www.fws.gov/wheeler for the most up-to-date closure status.

WHEELER NATIONAL
WILDLIFE REFUGE

Calendar of Events

Autumn 2022

VISITOR CENTER
256.350.6639

Even though the Visitor Center and Observation Building are 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!

- 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

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

Rachel Carson wrote the book *Silent Spring* which is not an easy read but should be a school requirement.

As a lifelong horsewoman who has devoted my whole life to sharing my passion with gobs of the coolest kids, this quote from Carson totally resonated with me: "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in". It really doesn't matter what you're sharing, you just have to do it! Everything our WWRA Friends group supports at Wheeler is based on that premise,

and from it we structure all our programs which include something for every age and interest.

Please consider participating in our annual events such as *Clean-up for the Cranes* and each January attending our *Festival of the Cranes*. Once again we have an outstanding line-up of presenters – please come and invite all your friends. There is something for everyone!

And the same is true when renovation of the Visitor Center and Observation Buildings, and construction of the new outdoor classroom are all completed—we can't wait for you to come back home to Wheeler NWR.

WELCOME, NICK WIRWA!

WWRA Wildlife Biologist

Nick Wirwa grew up in west Tennessee with a love for wildlife and the outdoors. In 2003, he received a bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Management from UT Martin. While there he began his career with USFWS and worked during the summers as a biotech at the Tennessee NWR. A master's degree in Wildlife and Fisheries Science from South Dakota State University followed including field work on Kealia Pond NWR in Maui, HI, studying aquatic invertebrates as the diet for waterbirds. In the off season he served as a biotech for the Central Louisiana NWR Complex.



Nick Wirwa with a Greater White-fronted Goose

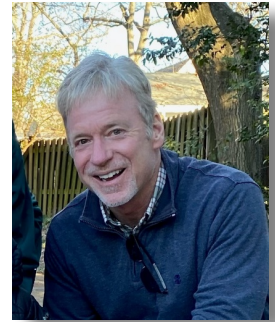
After graduating from SDSU in 2007, Nick began his first full-time position with USFWS serving as the wildlife refuge specialist at Merritt Island NWR in Florida. After two years there he accepted a position as assistant refuge manager at the nation's first national wildlife refuge, Pelican Island NWR in Florida. In 2010, to further his career and experience in waterfowl management, Nick accepted a wildlife biologist position at the Lower Mississippi NWR Complex. Since 2015, he has served as the wildlife biologist for the South Arkansas NWR Complex, where he managed wetlands for waterfowl and open pine habitat for red-cockaded woodpecker populations.

Now, after 20 years of experience with the Service, Nick says he is excited and blessed to begin a new season as the wildlife biologist for the Wheeler NWR Complex. "North Alabama is such a beautiful and biologically diverse place. I'm most certain this opportunity will be extremely rewarding and fulfilling."

"My wife, Mary Helen, and I are looking forward to all the opportunities the Decatur area and Northern Alabama have to offer. We enjoy camping, hiking, reading, and coffee shops. When I get the chance, I enjoy duck hunting and bow hunting and look forward to more fishing opportunities on the Tennessee River. "

THANK YOU, THERESA LOWERY & WELCOME, JOHN RICE!

Theresa Lowery, WWRA's notoriously camera-shy, but meticulous and remarkable long time treasurer, has resigned her position, but will continue to serve the refuge as a Visitor Center volunteer. We are truly grateful for her eleven years of excellent service to our Friends of Wheeler group.



We are equally delighted to welcome John Rice as our new WWRA treasurer. John grew up adjacent to the Refuge in Decatur's Hickory Hills, where he spent many hours exploring the nearby woods and backwaters. John was a Wheeler NWR Youth Conservation Corps employee, and his father, Harry Rice, retired from the Department of Interior and became Director of Point Mallard Park. John is married to Amanda Brownlee Rice, a Decatur native, and they have two sons and four grandsons. A graduate of Decatur High School, Auburn University and UAH, John is retired from the Department of Defense and operates an engineering consulting business in Huntsville.

NANCY ROSS WILLIAMS 1928 - 2022



Remembering an extraordinary lady.... Miss Nancy's passion was shorebirds, and after her husband's passing in 2006, she came to Wheeler NWR every day and volunteered for four hours.

Miss Nancy knew every duck on the pond and how many sandhill or whooping cranes happened to be there that day. Each day in the observation building she spoke to visitors from all over the country making them feel welcome, and she clearly enjoyed it so much. In 2008 she was named Volunteer of the Year. We miss her!

RUSSELL THOMPSON 1944 - 2022

Russ and Carol Thompson served as RV Volunteers at Wheeler NWR for many years. Among many other things, they spent much of their time operating the Visitor Center and monitoring Whooping cranes and were a valuable asset to refuge staff and visitors. We are grateful for their service to Wheeler and hold Carol in our thoughts as we mourn the passing of Russ.





**A LETTER TO HARVEY KERN, AMERICAN BIRD CONSERVANCY
RE: USE OF AGRICULTURAL CHEMICALS ON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES**

From the Members of the WURA Board

Dear Mr. Kern,

We read with interest your July 22, 2022, news release concerning agricultural chemical use on National Wildlife Refuges and your rationale for phasing out that use. However, past experience has demonstrated that farming with the use of chemicals allows land managers to provide the necessary amount of grain crops to meet resource objectives while minimizing the amount of farmland needed to do so. Accordingly, we feel strongly that there are compelling reasons for the continued strategic use of certain agricultural chemicals and that these reasons should be a part of the decision-making process when determining whether or not the use of agricultural chemicals should continue on National Wildlife Refuges.

Many National Wildlife Refuges currently use farming as a tool to produce food for migratory birds and other wildlife. For example, Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1938 along the middle-third of the Tennessee River in Alabama by Executive Order 7926 as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife. The Refuge currently supports the state's largest wintering waterfowl and sandhill crane populations, ranging from 50,000 - 75,000 ducks and 15,000 - 20,000 cranes. In addition, the Refuge winters 10-20 endangered Whooping Cranes in the Eastern Migratory Population, supporting efforts to re-establish the species in eastern North America.

A significant portion of the food for wintering waterfowl using the Refuge is produced through a cooperative farming program in which approximately 3,500 acres are planted annually. The goal of the program is to provide food and cover for migratory birds and other resident wildlife. The program supplements natural foods with grain foods, such as corn, millet and milo which are higher in overall nutrition value than natural moist soil seed production.

Prohibiting the use of agricultural chemicals would effectively eliminate farming as a management tool on Wheeler NWR. Waterfowl and cranes wintering in the area would predominately feed on private lands where much lesser chemical restrictions and BMPs exist. It is likely that the number of wintering waterfowl and cranes using Wheeler NWR will decline by more than 75% if existing croplands (10% percent of the total refuge acreage) were allowed to succeed to a forested condition. Farming provides a much-needed diversity of habitat and food source for this guild of species. Forested wetlands, riparian corridors, and shrub/scrub habitat is already abundantly available to support a rich diversity of other migratory bird species.

Cooperative farming agreements with local farmers is a very involved process that prescribes all the conditions under which farming is allowed to occur and outlines certain guidelines and restrictions, including location of crops, techniques, type of crops, and chemicals that are allowed for use. Prior to their development annually, chemicals proposed for use are vetted through endangered species biologists in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) Ecological Services program and their recommendations are included in the cooperative agreements. The refuge farming program in the southeast provides a model for others to use in order to conduct farming operations in an environmentally responsible manner resulting in higher water quality and improved habitat conditions than those found on most surrounding private farmlands.

An important consideration to note is the rigorous annual process that occurs prior to any chemical use on national wildlife refuges. The Service evaluates each chemical proposed for use and only approves them if it can be shown that their use can be carried out safely, effectively, and only when necessary in accordance with Integrated Pest Management practices and prescribed BMPs such as extensive buffers to wetlands and other sensitive habitats. A great number of EPA approved agricultural chemicals are restricted on national wildlife refuges.

Wheeler NWR annually conducts biweekly waterfowl and crane surveys from October through March. These biweekly surveys have been conducted for nearly three decades and there has never been an instance of wildlife mortality where farming or pesticide use was suspected. Much of the information being used to eliminate chemical use on refuges is heavily biased and fails to fully represent the available science that exists. The simple fact is that supplemental feeding of waterfowl and other migratory birds on refuges is an important tool that promotes less exposure to chemicals and disturbance on surrounding private lands. This results in less expenditure of energy and better overall body condition upon arrival at the breeding grounds.

The consequences of banning the use of agriculture chemicals on Refuges are dire. We anticipate that migratory birds, primarily waterfowl and cranes, will find far less food and desirable habitat and their use of refuges as feeding and resting sites will decline significantly. Without food, birds will be forced from the sanctuary of refuges onto adjacent farmlands which presents significantly more adverse impacts than they would experience on refuges.

We hope you understand our concerns. We would be happy to discuss these issues and concerns with the American Bird Conservancy and other bird conservation organizations at any time.



Cooper's Hawk
Accipiter cooperii
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?

North Alabama TRAILS & RECREATION EXPO

October 1, 2022
Point Mallard Park
Decatur, AL

Free Activities:
Biking, Canoeing,
Climbing, & more!





Adults: \$10 Ages 12 & Under: FREE
10:00 AM - 6:00 PM
Tickets: natrails.org/natrexpo/

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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DECATUR, ALABAMA 35603

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>

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



Shop at AmazonSmile and Amazon will make a donation to WWRA!

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.



Growing up around Decatur's Burningtrees Country Club, we used to drive past the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge daily. I always loved seeing all the water and animals in the area, as my mother always had a special place in her heart for ducks and turtles. I became a runner while in college, and really started to enjoy the ultramarathons. In training for these, my husband and I and friends would go to Wheeler Refuge to do some training and really fell in love with the area and the refuge--including its beauty and its conservation mission. We knew it would be a great place for a race, so we kept it in the back of our minds until we were in a place to plan and put on an event.

Last year, we felt that the time was right to explore the possibility of having a race on Wheeler NWR. Luckily, we were met with friendly support from the Refuge and from Wildlife Refuge Association while pursuing a permit and in the planning process. The excitement to showcase the refuge, the desire to promote its mission, the want to put on North Alabama's first 100-mile race, and our eagerness to give back to the community were our driving forces. And just like that, the Blue Herons Hundreds race was becoming a reality. We felt that our race should be named after the blue heron, since according to North American Native tradition, the blue heron brings messages of self-determination and self-reliance—the same qualities ultrarunners have in order to complete these long events.

A couple of weeks before the race, we were blessed with some more great news in that we were going to be able to use an amazing house and area for the start and finish line, thanks to Singing River Trails and 1818 Farms. Now we were ready for the big day. Wheeler Ranger David Young came to talk about its the conservation mission, and the runners were going to see first-hand, the beauty and lands that are so important to the waterfowl and the twelve federally endangered species that are protected on these lands.



The runners were supported by four aid stations on each 20-mile loop, which provided them with water, electrolytes, chips, sweets, potatoes, egg and bacon tortillas, burgers, and just about any other snacks they could imagine. The 20 and 100km runners received a custom blue heron medal for their efforts and the 100 mile finishers received a custom Blue Heron Hundreds belt buckle. Belt buckles are traditionally awarded to 100-mile finishers, as about 45 years ago, someone decided to compete in a 100 mile horse race, without the horse and on his own two feet. After completing the race, he was awarded the same award as the horse riders—a belt buckle. From then on, buckles have been given out as awards. Collecting buckles from races of this distance has become a sport in and of itself for some.



At the end of the weekend, the race concluded with ten finishers in the 100-mile race, with Dianna Cioppi leading the way with a finish time of 24 hours and 4 minutes. The 100km race had 14 finishers, and the 20-miler had 33 finishers. Nine states were represented. We were pleased with the turn-out for the first year of the event. We are hoping to continue this event, so we can showcase the refuge and to help others become more aware of the conservation mission of Wheeler NWR.

I will end with some advice from a great blue heron. This applies to the runners of our event, but also to everyone. This is something to think about each time you see one of these majestic birds:

- Wade in to Life!
- Keep a keen lookout
- Don't be afraid to get your feet wet
- Be patient
- Look below the surface
- Enjoy a good reed
- Go fish!

Kathy Youngren

Go ahead and mark your calendars now:
The 12th annual Festival of the Cranes is just four months
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

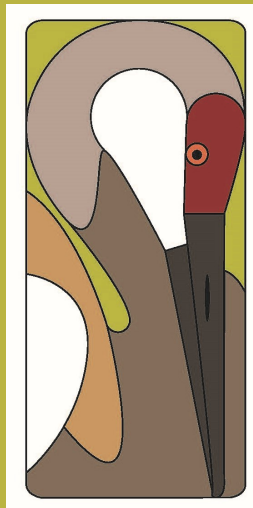
Delano Park

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

