

Bitter Lake News

January 2022



PRESIDENT'S CORNER by Merideth Hildreth

HAPPY NEW YEAR 2022!

The Friends of Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge Board is kicking off the new year with the Winter Membership Meeting scheduled for *noon on Saturday, January 29* at the Refuge Visitor's Center. This will be a potluck and election of board members. Lindsey Landowski, Director of Bitter Lake NWR will present an update of activities and projects on the Refuge. The Board will provide the barbeque. Bring your yummiest hotdish, salad, or desert to share. After the meeting, the Refuge will conduct a Grand Opening of the Bird Blind for Friends Members and their guests.

At this time, the Dragonfly Festival Committee is starting to plan for the September 2022 Dragonfly Festival. Let us know if you would like to serve on the committee, help with the Festival, or be an event sponsor. The Refuge and the Friends group are scheduling the following volunteer events this Spring: Butterfly Trail Cleanup and Planting, and Sunflower Area Spring Cleanup.

Special thanks to Jim Montgomery for sharing his expertise about the Lesser Sandhill Cranes at the Cranes and Cocoa event held the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Approximately 120 people visited the refuge and enjoyed cookies, cocoa, hot spice tea, and cranes. I did some holiday shopping in the Nature Store as did many other visitors that day. The Nature Store is open Wednesday - Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Beautiful t-shirts, books, jewelry and

President's Corner continued

other items are available for purchase. The sale of these unique items provides funding for the Friends to support projects on the Refuge. Friends members receive a 10% discount! A special thanks to Barbara Scheer who has served as the Nature Store's volunteer manager for many years and to Jana Burch who has graciously stepped up to learn from Barbara and is now managing the store. As always, thank you to the RV volunteers who tend the store and also perform countless maintenance and repair projects on Refuge facilities.

There are many volunteer opportunities either at the Refuge or from home. We are looking for members to volunteer both brains and brawn in the following areas: social media, accounting, computer hardware and software, data entry, public relations writing, membership recruitment, sponsorships for events and special projects, assistance at events, grant writing and research, assistance with trail maintenance, etc. Call Barbara Scheer 575.420.2581 if you'd like to volunteer.

Besides dragonflies, damselflies, cranes and other birds, deer, antelope, coyotes, and other wildlife, over 70 sinkholes are located on Bitter Lake NWR. Caves, sinkholes, and underground streams are found in karst terrain. The world is celebrating the 2021 & 2022 International Year of Caves and Karst. Visit <http://iyck2021.org/> to find out more about the importance of protecting karst aquifers.

See the last page of this newsletter to renew your membership. Please invite your family, friends, and colleagues to also become members. Visit the Friends website <https://www.friendsofbitterlake.org/> and follow Friends on Facebook: **Friends of Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge**.

The Refuge is open daily one hour before sunrise to one hour after sunset. Visit the Refuge's website https://www.fws.gov/refuge/bitter_lake/ and Visit the Refuge!

Water Management: It's for the Birds! By Jennifer Romero

When visitors come to Bitter Lake NWR, they are often expecting to see lakes full of water. For those who frequently visit the refuge, they know this is not the case, especially in the summer months. Instead of large lakes, Bitter Lake NWR is home to multiple man-made water impoundments that were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1940s-1950s. The water levels in these impoundments (also referred to as wetland units) can be manipulated by refuge staff through water control structures. The wetland units have been managed differently over time, which was often the result of new management or the environment changing. The biggest change happened in the 1990s when the refuge stopped keeping the units at full capacity year-round; instead, water levels in the units were gradually drawn down during the spring, kept low in the summer, gradually raised up in the fall, and kept full in the winter. This type of water management is still being utilized today, and adjustments are made depending on the current conditions and management objectives.

Water Management continued

Managing water this way serves multiple purposes. For one, the summers in the Roswell area are typically very hot and dry, and the wetland units experience high evaporation rates during this time. The refuge is allotted a limited amount of water to use annually, so management needs to ensure water is being used efficiently. By keeping water levels low in the summer, the refuge loses less water to evaporation, and this water can then be used in the fall and winter during waterfowl migration. In addition, the lower water levels in the spring and summer expose mud flats that are used by shorebirds for foraging and nesting, and native vegetation is given the opportunity to grow in these areas. This vegetation is then flooded in the fall, and it provides valuable food resources to waterfowl. In the winter months, the wetland units are filled, but water levels are still manipulated to provide a diversity of habitat. Some units are kept shallower to accommodate dabbling ducks and roosting sandhill cranes that prefer less water, and some units have deeper areas where diving ducks can happily plunge into the depths in search of food. It is also important to keep water flowing through all the wetland units to prevent the water from becoming stagnant.



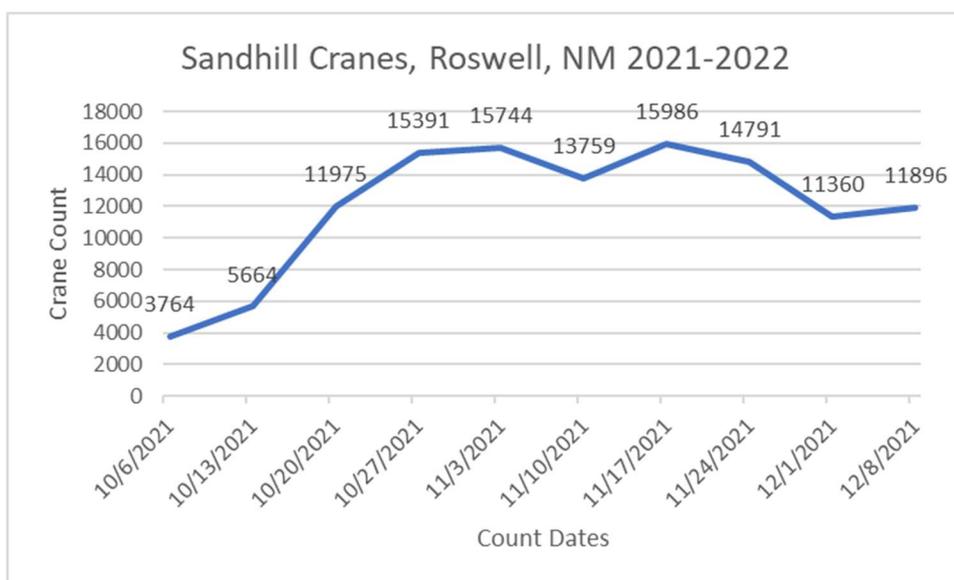
The refuge also manages several moist soil units, and they are planted with different crops like millet and winter wheat during the summer and early fall. Refuge staff then flood these units in the fall and winter, which makes the food resources available for the migrating waterfowl to use. These units can be seen on the east side of the wildlife drive, and you can often spot ducks, geese, and sandhill cranes in them during the day.

Adaptive water management on Bitter Lake NWR creates a diversity of habitats for a variety of wildlife. As a result, you can find more than 350 bird species on the refuge, including more than 120 species of water birds. Next time you are out on the wildlife drive, try to see how many different species you can spot and notice how not every species is found in the same area.

Crane Migration Update

J.C. Boothe, Biological Technician

The Sandhill Crane migration is underway at Bitter Lake! We hit peak migration around early and late November and we're now seeing a slow decline in numbers. We're not seeing the great numbers typical of years past, but the cranes appear to be staying around much longer. There can be numerous factors as to why more cranes are lingering around Roswell instead of moving on. This past summer we had much needed rains come through the region, causing an explosion of desert flora and fauna. I can't tell you the number of times I've heard "this is not a normal summer for us!". Plus, the above average warmer weather for November is not putting pressure on the cranes to move further South. Over the summer refuge staff and interns helped get our moist soil units back into production, planting winter wheat and millet in four of the units. At the start of migration, the cranes were seen utilizing these units for roosting and possible feeding. I want to say thank you to our dedicated volunteers and refuge staff for waking up extra early and some coming all the way from Santa Fe to help with the counts as it would not be possible without them!



Cranes and Cocoa Event

By Steve Alvarez

Adjusting to the COVID-19 crisis, refuge staff and the Friends of Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge held one of its first special event since the epidemic began. The Friends group and refuge staff organized the annual “Cranes and Cocoa” event to highlight the fall migration. Traditionally held the Saturday after Thanksgiving, this yearly program has become very popular with families celebrating the holidays.

Due to the pandemic, the Joseph R. Skeen Visitor Center was partially closed with a limit of six visitors allowed inside the nature store at one time. The usual interpretive crane program was not held this year due to the closure of the auditorium. Volunteer and crane expert, Dr. Jim Montgomery, organized and held an interpretive station outside the visitor center answering questions about cranes to interested guests.



Although the visitor center was partially closed, enthusiastic visitors didn't seem to mind as they formed lines outside the center to be served cookies and hot cocoa. Over one hundred guests were served their refreshments before heading out into the refuge to view the roosting Sandhill cranes and Snow geese.

The weather and sunset were perfect that evening as over 10,000 sandhill cranes flew into the refuge to bed down for the night. The sights and sounds of nature were on display. Once again “Cranes and Cocoa” was a flying success!