



Christmas Bird Counts

A Summary of Three Counts

By: Jennifer Wilson

The very popular National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) were initiated in 1900. Counts are done at a set location each year and involve counting all birds seen or heard in 24 hours within a 15-mile wide circle. Information from these counts is used to examine species distribution and population trends. Three counts include refuge lands in Brazoria and Matagorda Counties; Brazoria, Freeport, and San Bernard.

This year the San Bernard CBC was Friday, December 17. The count area



White-tailed kites are commonly seen during the CBC at San Bernard.

includes all of the San Bernard core refuge and several bottomland tracts. The count total reached 193 species. Noteworthy observations included 85 pine warblers, buff-bellied and Anna's hummingbird, a *Caprimulgis* (goatsucker) species for only the second time, indigo bunting, and

Wilson's plover. The count-down dinner for the San Bernard Count is hosted at the San Bernard Refuge Headquarters and features the cooking talents of Friends Board Members Ron Bisbee and Marty Cornell.

The Freeport CBC was Sunday, December 19. The list reached 206 species and included notables such as calliope hummingbird, *Caprimulgis* species, ladder-backed woodpecker, and painted bunting. Area 5 of the count contains portions of Brazoria NWR and private property. Within this area 153 species were recorded.

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Species Profile

Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanilla*)

By: Thomas Adams

The Gulf Fritillary is one of the most common butterflies observed on the refuge and one of the easiest to attract to your yard if you have plants which provide it with nectar and host food



for its larvae. Gulf fritillaries are distinguished by bright orange with black markings on the upper side of the wings with flecks of white on orange on the underside.

The larvae or caterpillar of

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Dates of Interest

- Friends Annual Business Meeting, January 23, 2:30PM at the Discovery Center
- Volunteer Appreciation Dinner, February 10, 5:30—social, 6:15—dinner
- Brazoria NWR Open House at Field Headquarters, February 23, 10:00am—2:00pm

Christmas Bird Counts—cont.

Notable observations for this area included over 1600 canvasback and redheads on Nicks Lake; glossy ibis (the official bird of the count from Olney Pond), and groove-billed ani.



A rare visitor to the Refuge; a groove-billed ani was observed on the Brazoria NWR during the Freeport Count.

The Brazoria Count was Saturday, January 01. The count totaled 146 species. Notable observations on this count included broad-tailed hummingbird, rufous hummingbird, Baltimore oriole, white-breasted nuthatch, chuck-wills widow and pine siskin.

If you would like to find a count near you, please consider one of these! New birders are welcome and compilers will match them with an experienced party. The summaries for the 2010/2011 counts provided by Ron Weeks, Bob White, and Mike Austin were referenced above.

A Holiday Visitor



A Cape shellduck escaped captivity and spent some time visiting North American cousins on the Brazoria NWR.

Webcams Open New Opportunities for Wildlife Viewing

By Denis Mudderman

Wildlife webcams have become popular among FWS and refuges as a way to engage the public in wildlife observation. Many have been integrated with environmental education programs. One of the premiere FWS webcams is the eagle cam at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia. In 2009, the training center offered their first course on remote cameras for wildlife observation.

The Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges have a remote camera project by Torry Tvedt at Brazoria NWR intended to view a caracara nest and transmit video to the Discovery Center. Most refuge webcams have been directed at eagles, ospreys, and other birds. Seasonal volunteer Denis Mudderman, set up a remote camera in an active beaver lodge at Tamarac NWR in Minnesota recently.

At the annual Friends meeting on January 23, the beaver lodge webcam and the caracara webcam will featured, as well as

a look at other notable FWS webcams.



The Eaglecam at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services National Conservation Training Center is available on the web at <http://outdoorchannel.com/Conservation/EagleCam.aspx>

Volunteers—An Essential Component in Refuge Operations

In December, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer Improvement Act. The Act authorizes 3 million annually to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a national strategy for coordinating volunteer efforts and reporting back to Congress on volunteer programs, community partnership programs and refuge education programs. The initial legislation in 1998 which au-

thorized a pilot program was an essential component of the strong “Friends” movement and helped refuges develop volunteer programs.

Volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart.
~Elizabeth Andrew

Volunteers are an essential part of refuge operations across the Nation. It is esti-

mated that Refuge Friends and volunteers perform roughly 20% of all the work done on national wildlife refuges. In 2009 volunteers nation-wide contributed more than 1.4 million hours or the equivalent of 665 full-time employees .

Texas Mid-coast is no exception. Volunteers contribute more than 13,000 hours annually or 22% of our annual workforce.

Managing Wetlands Benefit Migratory Birds & Hunting Opportunities

By Curtis Jones

Waterfowl hunting is a long- lasted tradition for many residents on the Texas Coast. In the past couple of years the San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge has collaborated with Texas R.I.C.E to make improvements to the Pentagon Marsh impoundments in the Sargent Unit and the permit hunt area. These improvements consisted of levee reconstruction and the addition of four new water control structures which enable refuge staff to manage water levels and vegetation within the impoundments that are pre-

ferred by migrating waterfowl. The end result has benefited not only the hunters but the wildlife as well. The ability to maintain areas of fresh water during drought years and low tide events has proven to be extremely valuable for resident mottled ducks and other wildlife. Many hunters have experienced the improvements first hand and commented on the quality of the habitat and the number of birds in the units on their harvest surveys. These surveys have also shown and increase in hunter success.

Plans have been discussed to make additional levee repairs in the future with the installation of several more water control structures within Pentagon Marsh. The ultimate goal is to provide quality wildlife habitat while providing the public the opportunity to enjoy memorable waterfowl hunting experiences.

The Sargent Permit Waterfowl Hunt area is located off of FM 457 just north of the Intercoastal Waterway; and permits are drawn through a lottery every year prior to the opening of waterfowl season.

After 45 Years, Brazoria has a Field Headquarters

By Jennifer Sanchez

During the spring of 2004, I took our new Refuge Supervisor from Albuquerque, Aaron Archibeque out to Otter Slough and shared a vision of creating a field headquarters for the Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge. We were renting boat stalls for shops and storage and an old mobile home for office space from the Bastrop Marina. At that time, we had no identified funds available, refuge budgets were declining and vacancies were being left unfilled across the nation to cut expenses. But we were determined to make it happen and take advantage of any opportunity that arose.

The first opportunity came through the same process that was cutting expenses; Work Force Planning. Focus refuges were identified by the Region and those refuges were funded at 25% above salaries to create sustainable budgets. This brought an additional \$100,000 to the Complex in 2005. If we were going to build a headquarters, we needed to start with the utilities. We obligated funds to put in a water well, carry electricity from the front gate, .7 miles down the road, and road improvements.

Since that first year, we have utilized approximately \$50K out of the operating funds for the Complex to continue to

develop the headquarters. In 2006/2007 fill material was brought into the area and a 20' x 50' metal storage building was erected on site.

In 2008, we acquired a mobile home from FEMA's Hurricane Katrina response. For just over 5K for transport and tie-down, we had an office for the first time on the refuge. Ironically, the staff moved out of the leased trailer and into their new office just before Hurricane Ike struck Galveston. The storm broke windows, blew off siding and damaged the roof of the old office while the new office weathered the storm well.

A second metal building was purchased in 2008 but it remained in pieces until 2010 when a slab was poured and the building finally erected in December.

When President Obama signed the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), we were hopeful. A project to replace the mobile home with a permanent structure was already in the back-logged maintenance database.

The Brazoria office was one of two replacement offices selected by the Region to receive funding. In July of 2010, the contractor broke ground. The Brazoria staff (including the firecrew and a law enforcement officer) will be moving into the new facility in January.

There is still some work to be completed in 2011, like construction of a tractor shed and moving fuel tanks and equipment out of the boat stalls at Demi John. Brazoria NWR, which was established in 1966, finally has a home. Please join us February 23, from 10:00am—2:00pm for an open house dedication at the new office.





Friends Happenings



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Preserving and protecting the wildlife and habitat within the Texas Mid-coast region and providing opportunities for visitors to enjoy these unique lands.

On the Web

<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/texasmidcoast>

<http://www.refugefriends.org>

The Friends of Brazoria Wildlife Refuges supports the Mid-coast Refuges through partnering on public use, outreach, and habitat projects.

- The next meeting of the Friends will be held on January 23rd at 2:30 pm in the Discovery Center. The annual election of Board members will be held and Denis Mudderman will present a program on the use of remote live video cameras in the Refuge System.
- With the completion of the Tveten Trail and restroom facilities, remaining Texas Trail Grant funds will be utilized for the concrete and rock material on the Bayou Loop Trail at Dow Woods. Several volunteer work days will be scheduled to assist with the spreading of crushed concrete and granite this spring. Also, the 48' octagon pavilion and concrete foundation will be contracted this spring as well.
- Contracted by the Friends, Rosene Creative Services (RCS) continues to work on the three interpretive panels for the Discovery Center. Preliminary artwork and text have been approved for the Freshwater, Prairie and Saltwater habitat panels.
- Planning for the 2011 Migration Celebration continues. This annual outreach event is scheduled for April 15th at RiverPlace in Freeport and April 16 - 17th at the San Bernard NWR. Over 100 volunteers assisted with this event in 2010 as over 1000 visitors enjoyed numerous activities. For more information, contact David Plunkett, Migration Celebration Chairman, visit the website (www.migrationcelebration.org), or find us on Facebook.
- Friends have applied for a \$32,000 grant through the North American Wetland Conservation Act's Small Grants Program to continue wetland and prairie development and

Species Profile (cont.)

the fritillary looks imposing with rows of black "spikes" along its back, but these serve more as a warning sign to predators.

The larvae of fritillary take up toxic alkaloids when



they ingest the leaves of its host plant, the passionflower. When a predator, for example a bird, ingest the larvae the alkaloid will upset its stomach and serve as a reminder not to prey on this species of caterpillar again.

There are two passionflower species found on the refuge: Maypop (*Passiflora incarnata*) and Yellow Passionflower (*Passiflora lutea*).

The Maypop can be found as a vine in

open fields, pastures, fence lines and forest edges from spring into late fall. The plant peaks in growth by August, producing golf ball shaped fruits that are eaten by wildlife and are edible to humans.



Maypop



Yellow Passionflower

The yellow passion flower is a dime-size, shade loving vine of the bottomland hardwood forests. In a pinch the fritillary larvae will consume the leaves of

yellow passion flower but it is the Maypop they prefer overall. Both species die back in the winter.

The Maypop is practically a weed outside the refuge and can be collected with a shovel but because it has deep roots the plant will die back when transplanted. If collected early enough it will reemerge and vigorously vine on a trellis or fence in time for fritillary egg laying. In addition to passionflowers you can attract fritillaries by planting flowers which provide it nectar. Lantanas are good as are many plants in the sunflower family.

Gulf Fritillaries range from South America to the southern half of the United States. In winter they'll migrate south to areas that rarely freeze. Have your garden established by April and you'll be ready for the return of the Gulf fritillary and in the summer your passionflowers will be crawling with larvae.