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CHALLENGES OF THE BOSQUE: balancing people's passion for the place with the needs of wildlife

(Editor's note: This year John Vradenburg, Supervisory Biologist at Bosque del Apache NWR, and Kevin Cobble, Refuge Manager, delivered the keynote address at our annual dinner during the Festival of the Cranes. With John's permission I have drawn from my notes and his slides to provide the following excerpts from his presentation.)

When viewed from a global perspective, the Bosque is a small dot on a huge map. That small dot is, however, extremely important for many reasons. It annually hosts over 200,000 wintering waterbirds, as well as millions of other waterbirds, raptors, and neotropical birds that use the refuge during migration. The refuge is also a place of personal, emotional, physical and visual meaning for all who come here. For the local community it is 'their' refuge; for staff

{ The refuge means something different to everyone. That is why it is special. }

and volunteers, a place to share skills; for the Friends staff and members, a place to support research and education; for photographers, bird watchers and Festival goers, a place to view, document and capture iconic images of wildlife and environment. These images symbolize the passion people feel about this place and connect a larger refuge community. The refuge means

something different to everyone and that is why it is special.

For me the Bosque is where I use my knowledge of soil, water and plants to manage a diverse floodplain ecosystem and ensure that these wetlands will sustain the birds and other wildlife that dwell here. My experience here began as a teenager watching the whooping cranes and the skies filled with birds. Returning as a graduate student and new professional I was amazed at the restoration work and management of the Bosque wetlands. It was my dream to work at the Bosque and having reached this goal it has become a place for personal growth. The Bosque has challenged me to expand my skills and knowledge and become a better land manager.

As one of the most intensively managed and productive wetlands in the USFWS, the Bosque is the perfect learning environment, and mentoring the next generation of land managers is perhaps our greatest contribution to conservation. The Bosque is also part of a greater community of farmers, townspeople and small business owners and I want that community to be proud of the refuge in their backyard. My family has grown up with the refuge and my feelings of family have grown to include the staff, volunteers and visitors to the refuge.

The daily challenge for the refuge is to understand the diversity and value of individual connections to this special place and then find a balance between public interest and the refuge mission which puts wildlife first. How do we research, monitor and manage this complex floodplain environment to the benefit of the cranes, snow geese, ducks, shorebirds and endangered species while providing opportunities to birdwatchers, photographers, fishermen, hunters and educators to experience this special environment? Here are some examples. Sometimes we close areas to protect wildlife but these closures also protect visitors. We manage the corn crop to meet the needs of the birds, but these feeding areas provide quality observation opportunities for visitors. Establishing bicycle routes provides viewing

opportunities, while seasonal closure of these routes limits this source of disturbance at critical times for the wildlife. A complex water management plan meets the birds' needs but also provides new viewing opportunities throughout the winter.

In sum, the challenge is not easy, but it is worth it. The refuge experiences tremendous wildlife

The experiences we seek in nature can have a deeper meaning and bring us closer to wildlife and our environment.

use and our ability to sustain this environment contributes to conservation at a continental scale. For people, and as a society, the experiences we seek in nature can have a deeper meaning and bring us closer to wildlife and our environment. Anything that engages youth and develops a wildlife ethic is good for the future of conservation.

I am grateful to all of you, my family, the Bosque staff, volunteers, my biology team, photographers and visitors, without whose support my work here at Bosque would have less meaning.



FROM THE EDITOR

As usual in January, the media is full of retrospective reviews of the year that was. For those of us who visit, work or volunteer at the refuge, 2013 has to be one for the record books. In total it was a mix of ups and downs. We had record drought and record rain (and flooding), record budget cuts for the FWS but record registration and participation at the Festival of the Cranes...despite unexpected, if not record, snow fall. We had a record first ever appearance of a rufous-necked woodrail in our environs, with record numbers of birdwatchers and visitors which boosted Nature Store sales during a traditionally slow time, and then a record number of furlough days which created problems everywhere you looked. We've had a record number of waterfowl wintering at the Bosque this year, and though the train wreck on the refuge scattered volkswagon Jettas across the landscape, the refuge was able to acquire some of the shipment of raw sugar that was among the derailed cars which will keep the hummingbird feeders at the Visitor Center full up for some time to come. Though all the numbers are not in, I estimate that

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OR...

Consider a donation to the Friends of the Bosque in honor of those you love! You can donate online at <http://www.friendsofthebosque.org/store/basket/membership.html>



we gained a record number of new Friends members during the last quarter of the year and a healthy if not record increase in donations to the Friends.

I'd like to think that the ups outweighed the downs but as we enter the New Year, most of the important challenges remain. While monsoon moisture and run off have provided much needed water for the refuge, the weather pundits have pretty much given up trying to predict or model future weather patterns. Though Congress has passed a budget and future furloughs seem unlikely, continued budget cuts for the FWS and staff shortages are without doubt going to have an impact on how the refuge is managed and, perhaps most importantly for the Friends, how we use our revenues to support the refuge and our own educational programs. All of this will of course impact the challenges described by Supervisory Biologist John Vradenburg in our lead article. As I listened to John's presentation that night during Festival, I was struck by a summary comment he made in response to a question from the audience. He said in essence that given climate change and the other political and budgetary pressures that trickle down to the refuge, there will almost certainly be changes in the model or plan that is now used to manage the Bosque. The refuge as we now experience it may not exist in five years. I'd like to believe that given the growth and strength of the Friends of the Bosque in recent years that we will have a significant and increasingly supportive impact on the refuge's ability to meet these challenges.

--Lise Spargo

STORY BOARD

Have you got a story? Can you remember the first time you visited the refuge? Can you recall how you felt the first time you saw a cloud of snow geese leap into the sky? What's the most interesting animal you have seen at the Bosque? What was the impact on your children or grandchildren when you first brought them to see the cranes? We would like to hear your stories, and this is why.

This past fall, in keeping with the fact that 2013 marked the twentieth year for the Friends of the Bosque, John Bertrand, one of the founding members of the Friends, completed a written history of the Friends organization. With extraordinary energy and diligence, John combed the Friends files, unearthing and organizing new data and completing earlier chapters begun by Bob Jones. A document summary was available at the Friends open house during Festival, and the completed document will be available online in the near future. While this detailed account of Friends activities and achievements can only be a point of pride for this organization, John and the staff agreed that it would be more compelling if it included input from our membership. As an organization we measure our success in large part by the feedback we get from members and visitors. Lists of past presidents, fund raising events or educational programs are only half the story. Our history is incomplete unless we can include in some part the impact of what we do on our members and other visitors to the Bosque. So, if you have a story, long or short, funny or factual, happy or sad, send it along. If you tell us when you were here, the event you attended or some interaction with staff or volunteers, we will incorporate your account at the appropriate time and place in our chronology and it will be posted on line as part of the completed document. You don't have to be Shakespeare or Charles Kuralt, just send us a few lines (to lisespargo@aol.com) and share a bit of history.



The next time you feel stressed at work and wish you were watching wildlife at Bosque del Apache, point your browser to

<http://camera.friendsofthebosque.org/>

for a realtime view of activity at the display pond. The camera, given in honor of Harvey Furgatch by his friends, updates the scene approximately every ten minutes.



Our thanks to all who attended the annual meeting in October. The slate of candidates as presented in the October newsletter was elected. If you look at the back of this current issue you will find the new list of Board members and their contact information. In this election we welcomed back Board President Emeritus Paul White as a member at large, and said goodbye to Kitty Pokorny and Kumar Golap with our thanks for their time and effort on behalf of the Friends organization.

While we had planned a variety of activities for folks after the morning meeting, the effects of the furlough rose to the fore and we rallied our members to go out and clear vegetation around three of the viewing decks on the refuge. Coming at such a critical time, the effects of government shut down resulted in the refuge staff working virtually around the clock to prepare the ponds and fields for the incoming wintering birds. The Friends were pleased to be able to complete some of the visitor services related activities like clearing around the decks in time for Festival. Our bonus was the acquisition of a large amount of marsh willow, which is being used to complete the fence around the cactus arbo-retum.

In December the new Board met to begin planning for 2014 and to get a first read out on the 2013 Festival of the Cranes. As reported by Executive Director Leigh Ann

Vradenburg, the annual audit was complete and as of early January the Finance Committee was preparing to meet to review the final report in plenty of time to file our annual taxes.

Rachel Minnaar, a recent graduate in library science, is making progress on the Friends library which is a compilation of FWS files, reports, slides, photos, reference material and books including Robert Kruidenier's work. Once all the materials are organized and cataloged researchers will be able to examine the library holdings on line and portions, like Robert Kruidenier's journals and photos, will be available on our website for viewing by all.

NATURE STORE

The Festival merchandise was well received and the store drew many compliments for its new displays. The Tilley brand hats were a big hit and we even sold out of most of the pumpkin colored Festival shirts! Store manager Kim is in the process of updating our storeroom storage equipment. Our sales are strong and Kim's fresh, new ideas are to credit for that. In the last quarter of 2013 store sales were up 4% over the previous year.

FESTIVAL REPORT

In general, the new registration system, Cvent, worked very well. There are still a few tweaks we need to make but overall it has been a great system. Despite significant snowfall and a drop in weekend attendance, the "Year of Photography" events and workshops had a significant impact on Festival sales

growth and profit in 2013. Birding events session were increased from 53 to 55 while photography went from 4 to 42 event sessions. We only had to cancel one event because of weather and those who did come had many positive comments about the Expo Tent, Nature Store and the efforts of the refuge staff and volunteers. When the skies cleared on Sunday afternoon and the sun shone on the new snow, the Bosque became a photographer's paradise.

THANKS, Gina & Carl!

In December 2013, the Friends and refuge said farewell to two outstanding, longtime refuge staff – Ecologist Gina Dello Russo and Heavy Equipment Operator Carl Tafoya. Gina's partner development and work with private landowners has advanced restoration of the Rio Grande floodplain for the benefit of our whole region. Carl, known for his mastery of welding and his skill with all pieces of heavy equipment, was instrumental in salt cedar eradication throughout the south end of the refuge. The Friends wish Gina and Carl the best in their retirement and thank them for their tremendous service.



2014 Martha Hatch Award honors Skeeter Leard

This year the Friends were proud to present the Martha Hatch award for exceptional volunteer service to local artist, Skeeter Leard. For nearly three decades Skeeter's art has captured iconic images of New Mexico wildlife which have reached a local, national and international audience. Inspired by her early visits to Bosque del Apache NWR, Skeeter became one of the founding members of the Friends of the Bosque and was one of the primary organizers of the Fine Arts Show at the Festival of the Cranes.

Skeeter's art has graced the cover of a couple of Festival brochures and her Long Legs design has been the basis of our long-time, best-selling t-shirts in the Bosque Nature Store.

Skeeter is a member of Women Artists of the West, the American Plains Artist association and the Pastel Society of New Mexico. As characterized by her numerous friends Skeeter has always been 'the one who was always there', 'always ready to help', always advocating for the refuge and always ready to share her unique artistic vision as inspired by her love of the Bosque. You can view her art at skeetersdesigns.net, at local galleries in Socorro and at the Bosque Nature Store at the refuge.

CRANE FESTIVAL IN BHUTAN

This November my colleague Youme Nguyen Ly and I travelled to Bhutan to witness and participate in the Annual Festival of the Cranes. The Festival celebrates the return of the black-necked cranes from their summer home in the Tibetan plateau to their winter home in the soft wetlands of the Phobjikha Valley. Here in the Phobjikha Valley, they feed on waste grains from harvested crops and on nutritious bamboo shoots, along with worms and slugs and other savory insects!

The Crane festival started in 1998, initiated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN). In the words of Dr. Lam Dorji, the Executive Director of the RSPN, “the crane festival is a way for the community to renew their commitment to the cranes.” The Festival is now organized by the Phobjikha Environment Management Committee that consists of a broad array of stakeholders, including the RSPN, interested in ensuring the conservation of the cranes as well as creating opportunities for sustainable economic development for the people of the Phobjikha Valley. At the time of our visit, close to 300 cranes had already returned to their wintering grounds in Bhutan. The hope is with conservation efforts, their numbers will continue to grow each year.

The Crane Festival was held in the large courtyard of the Gangtey Monastery where close to a 1000 people came to celebrate the cranes. The school children performed traditional songs and an environmental skit about the migration of the cranes. They also performed a Crane dance inspired by the movements of the cranes. The program also included the traditional Chaam dances performed by the monks from the Gangtey Gomba. It was a feast of color and celebration!

The crane festival continues to educate the public about the importance of conserving this endangered species: one strategy is through the student art poster competition. This year the guest of honor at the Festival was George Archibald from the International Crane Foundation (ICF). He spoke to the audience about the importance of the communities’ collective work conserving these birds and he also was a judge to determine the 3 winners of the poster competition.



A view of the Phobjikha Valley, winter home of the black-necked cranes in Bhutan

The ICF and the RSPN and other conservation organizations have worked collectively for many years and across international boundaries to help preserve these beautiful sacred birds. Cranes are revered in Bhutan like in many countries around the world. RSPN's Dr. Lam Dorji said " the cranes have been part of life in Bhutan for hundreds of years and are part of our folklore." As we travelled through Bhutan we saw cranes painted on the walls of people's houses as well as on the walls of the monasteries. They are seen as symbols of longevity, fidelity and good luck.

--Diana Cohn

(Editors note: Diana and her colleague Youme Nguyen Ly are working on a children's book called Crane Boy inspired by this unique festival. While at the festival, Youme did her visual research for her paintings for the book and Diana worked on final edits for the manuscript based on commentary from the monks from the Gangtey Gompa, staff from the RSPN and the ICF, and from her visits to elementary classrooms in the Phobjika Valley. Crane Boy will be out in the winter of 2015 published by Cinco Puntos Press. Diana Cohn is executive director of the Panta Rhea Foundation, established in 2001 as a private foundation devoted to researching issues and analyzing the operations, goals and potential of organizations committed to building a more just and sustainable world.)



Clockwise from above: Monks from the Gangtey Gompa perform the traditional Chaam dance; school children participate in the crane dance; George Archibald of the International Crane Foundation presents the winner of the poster competition.





PHOTO OPS

The Bosque's winter residents are back! Observing and photographing them are lots of fun. Cranes are preparing to return north and opportunities abound to see them dancing and making practice flights in the warmer parts of the day until approximately mid-February.

Watching snow geese take off by the hundreds in a storm of white wings and deafening sound is breathtaking. You may think their coordination can be achieved only with a leader making the decision and others following without question, but that would be wrong.

Scientists (see, for example, the essay "Collective minds" in the jour-



nal Nature 445, 715, 15 February 2007) have found that in the world of birds a "General" is not needed. Each bird in a large flock independently processes the environmental inputs to make a decision, including the behavior of their neighbors. When they take off it is because all of them come to the conclusion nearly simultaneously that they need to fly. This also explains why they do not collide with each

other in these mass ascensions. Sometimes while watching snow geese you can hear their common conclusion through heightened chatter.

Hawk and eagle numbers at the Bosque are at their highest during the winter. Red-tailed and ferruginous hawks are among the larger hawks you are likely to see. They have a variety of color variations to challenge your identification skills. Northern harriers, somewhat smaller, can be recognized by their gliding flight as they skim the ground. The striking American kestrels are the smallest raptors and are also year-round residents, as are Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks.

Juvenile raptors haven't always learned to be wary of humans (including those with cameras), so they can provide you with more time to observe them and to take good photos. However, their lack of fear makes them more vulnerable than adult birds. Respect them by giving them their space.

From our experience we've learned that many birds, including birds





of prey, will fly off before you can get a good look at them if you exit your vehicle right next to them. Try taking your photos from inside your vehicle or by using the opposite side of the car as a shield. If the bird seems to be staying calm, you may slowly approach a bit closer. More than noise, sudden movements seem to upset most birds.

Since early winter, we've seen quite a few loggerhead shrike along Highway 1 near the ponds. These small grey, black-masked birds perch singly on fences, bushes or electric lines.



Although the Bosque is best known for its feathered inhabitants, its mammal residents are many. Keep an eye out for rabbits, elk, mule deer, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, and of course, raccoons.

Have you travelled the Intermittent Tour Road this year? Entered from the Farm Loop, this road will be open for one last time this winter, January 24th to 27th. It provides some different viewing opportunities that you're likely to enjoy!



Wishing you many happy moments at the Bosque in this New Year!

If you have something to share, please e-mail us at [***bosquebirds@gmail.com***](mailto:bosquebirds@gmail.com)
Kumar and Ingrid

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