Desert Arboretum is a Refuge for Plants (and People) on Bosque del Apache

Friends of Bosque del Apache will host the Desert Arboretum Stroll from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m on Saturday, April 22. Perhaps you are not even aware of this “other refuge” at the refuge – here’s a chance to come enjoy it! The Desert Arboretum, adjacent to the Friends House, is the most accessible refuge trail and is paved from the Visitor Center to all along the eastern edge of the garden. It is home to a hundred varieties of cacti, most from the Chihuahuan Desert, but also a few from the Sonoran, Mojave, and Great Basin deserts. And it boasts a handful of rare or endangered species.

Let me make clear right at the beginning that I am a plant person. It probably started with that garden that I created as an eight-year-old Cub Scout. Growing those radishes was a life-changing experience. I have always grown plants. Most recently, I grew vegetables for sale in our local Farmers Market, restaurants, and grocery store. Now I find myself helping to care for a cactus garden, the Desert Arboretum, at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. Finally, I can grow plants just to admire them and not be worried about when they are ready to harvest.

The Bosque del Apache is known worldwide as a refuge for birds and mammals. Birds are easy to love because of their beautiful plumage and their behavior and their migration. They jump around and whoop and swim and fly. Plants, on the other hand, spend most of their lives being inconspicuous. Often they are in the way of our bird watching. They have a brief colorful spring mating fling and then prepare for dormancy. They die in the fall. They get eaten. But that to me is their attraction. They are the true desert dwellers.
Our songbirds are really tropical residents that come here to nest, and our cranes and waterfowl are really denizens of the great white north that rest here in the winter. But think about that creosote bush or prickly pear cactus or ocotillo standing in the brutal hot sun in June, the subfreezing temperatures in January, and the relentless dry wind in April. Plants can’t move to the shade or migrate to warmer climes, or seek shelter, and they survive with just eight inches of precipitation all year. Desert plants are tough, slow-growing, and conservative. But when the conditions are right, desert plants are all-in and they party like there is no tomorrow.

As we prepare for that riotous flower party in the Desert Arboretum in April and May, we are thinking a lot about water. Cactus and shrubs and grasses don’t need much water, but they do need some. We are coming off a very wet winter, so the plants are in good shape for this spring. That won’t always be true, so we are planning an ambitious project to catch rain water from the original refuge office building, now known as the bunkhouse. The bunkhouse is situated adjacent to the Desert Arboretum and conveniently has a flat roof that slopes down to the north. We will catch the rainfall that leaves the roof via canales and pipe it into a large (1500- gallon) tank. The captured water will be pumped through plastic pipe to hydrants scattered throughout the arboretum. This new water supply will give us a bridge between the winter moisture and the arrival of the summer monsoons. Thanks to generous donors, the Friends of Bosque del Apache NWR is able to provide funding for this installation.

Come to the Desert Arboretum Stroll on Saturday, April 22 from 10-2 to marvel at our multitude of cacti in glorious bloom and to learn about these phenomenal desert dwellers. The Friends will be joined by other organizations, such as Native Plant Society, who will help visitors learn about our native cacti and other plants. Light refreshments will be served in the Friends House.

- Tom Hyden, Desert Arboretum Volunteer

- Photos by Don Boyd
As winter turns to spring, the warmer weather is bringing changes to the refuge. The cranes are headed north, and turkey vultures have arrived from the south. Our field operations are gearing up for the growing season. In early February, our cooperative farmers gave us notice that they would not be coming back to farm here. While disappointing, the loss of cooperative farming will allow us to move the farm program in a more sustainable direction. Refuge staff will do the farming, which will mean reducing the farming program. We will start by converting some farm fields to moist soil management and some to grassland habitat. With the success our staff have had in producing corn in the south unit the last two years, we are confident that we will be able to increase our corn yield substantially while reducing farm acreage and water usage.

Since last July, using bulldozers and excavators, refuge staff have been removing salt cedar along the Rio Grande floodplain within the San Pasqual footprint. We are transforming the look of the area as we remove large amounts of dense salt cedar and open up the cottonwood bosque. We have already cleared about fifty acres of salt cedar and hope to clear another two hundred plus acres on the burn scar.

The Rio Viejo Trail has undergone a major renovation. This past January, the trail was covered with crusher fines to make for easier walking, and new signage, bridges, and benches have been installed. The west side of the area has been cleared of salt cedar and is being restored to native plants. This should be a great trail for spring and summer bird watching. Refuge staff and volunteers have started offering spring trail tours, including a weekly tour of the Canyon Trail, one of the most scenic trails on the refuge.

Recently, the refuge and the Friends of the Bosque del Apache signed a new five-year partnership agreement. This covers activities of the Friends on the refuge and helps cement the working relationship between the Friends and the refuge. We are excited about our future work with the Friends and the critical support that they can give the refuge. The refuge has seen declining budgets for about seven years in a row, so the help that the Friends continue to give us is more critical than ever.

Thanks to the Friends of the Bosque del Apache, who purchased solar panels for the refuge, we now have 5.1 KWs of solar power running our wastewater treatment plant. This not only reduces our carbon footprint, it also saves the refuge money on electric bills, money that we can then use on field projects. Thank you Friends for your generous donations to the refuge!

Spring is a fantastic time to spend a day at the refuge. I encourage everyone to come and see the changes we are making here and enjoy the warm spring weather. The refuge staff take pride in making the refuge a great place to visit. Come on out and enjoy your public lands at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

- Kevin Cobble, Refuge Manager
In April and May, large birds descend upon agricultural fields to feed. You read that correctly, April and May. No, we’re not talking about sandhill cranes or snow geese. This time of year, it’s all about the incredible Swainson’s Hawks. And they’re not after the corn, or really any other seed they find in the fields. They are in search of insects. Yes, this raptor, slightly smaller than a red-tailed hawk, has just flown over 6,000 miles to eat crickets.

Crickets, dragonflies, and grasshoppers become a large portion of the Swainson’s Hawks’ diet from late August until about April, when they return to their North American breeding grounds, including Bosque del Apache, from Argentina. It’s thought that insects are a large part of the Swainson’s Hawks’ diet during their winter migration because these birds tend to congregate in large numbers on their breeding grounds, and insects are relatively plentiful (compared to, say, rodents) and are easy to catch when there are hundreds of hungry raptors around.

We typically see Swainson’s Hawks at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge beginning in late March, and continuing through the summer (when their diet shifts to a higher proportion of squirrels, small birds, and snakes). Stop on by to marvel at this “grasshopper hawk” who’s made the equivalent of six trips between Albuquerque and New York City, on the journey back to Bosque del Apache, their summer home and breeding ground.

- Amanda Walker, Park Ranger
Imagine a sea of orange fluttering wings covering dense fir trees in central Mexico. Nearly 700 million monarch butterflies wintered just north of Mexico City in the 1990s, creating these dense clouds of orange wings. Now, estimates are that fewer than 140 million monarchs make that long migration. Migration maps exist for known routes of monarchs, but very little data exist for New Mexico. We know that they come to Bosque del Apache NWR, but exactly where else in New Mexico do monarchs visit?

After the winter birds left last year, we began to notice orange and black monarch butterflies flitting around. Once they arrived, we refuge biologists began to survey sites more closely to see if the butterflies were staying here or just moving through. We learned that monarch butterflies stayed all summer and were breeding here, and that they were laying eggs on horsetail milkweed, a naturally occurring plant found along some of the ditches. Milkweed is the only plant monarchs can lay their eggs on and is the only plant the monarch caterpillars eat. Milkweed is a toxic plant if ingested by most animals, but the monarch has adapted to eating it, and instead of being detrimental to the caterpillar, milkweed makes the caterpillar (and butterfly) toxic as well, helping to prevent predation.

Along with surveying sites on the refuge, we also started tagging monarchs. Similar in theory to banding ducks in the winter to learn about migration patterns and population status, we tagged monarch butterflies during the autumn. We placed a small, uniquely numbered sticker on the outside of the monarch’s wing. Someone seeing that tag can report it to help researchers learn about where monarch butterflies go. In 2016, volunteers, staff biologists, and local students tagged 65 monarch butterflies. In 2017, we hope to tag over 100 monarchs.

This year, we’ve started an exciting new project in which anyone (you!) can participate: a citizen science project called “Monarchs along the Rio Grande in New Mexico” on iNaturalist.org. You can record sightings of monarch eggs, caterpillars, chrysalises, and butterflies in New Mexico. This project will help us learn about monarch migration and where they are able to find flowering plants, including milkweed, to support them through the summer months. Check out www.inaturalist.org/projects/monarchs-along-the-rio-grande-in-new-mexico to learn more. You can also download the iNaturalist app to upload your sightings from the field. Please participate and share your findings with us!

- Megan Goyette, Staff Biologist
Save These Dates to Join Us for Exciting Events!

NAT GEO WILD Bosque del Apache Episodes
NAT GEO WILD’S 3 episodes on Bosque del Apache are available at youtube.com/user/NatGeoWild!
“Untamed with Filipe DeAndrade” is a 10-part digital documentary series featuring America’s wild spaces—launching one episode on Nat Geo WILD every Tuesday starting March 14 and ending May 9. Episodes featuring Bosque del Apache are March 28 (Raptors), April 4 (Mountain Lions), and April 11 (Coyotes).

Canyon Hike
Explore a desert canyon with a naturalist. On this two-mile round-trip hike, search for wildlife, native plants, and stories in the rocks. Cost-free. Reservations suggested: Call 575-835-1828 x 0.

Understanding the Moon
Join amateur astronomers to learn theories of the Moon’s origin, to discover why the Moon has phases, and to explore how the Moon influences life on Earth. Limited to 30 participants, aged 8 and above. Cost-free. Reservations required: Call 575-835-1828 x 0.

Desert Arboretum Stroll
Marvel at cacti in full bloom, and stroll the paths to discover many natives of the Northern Chihuahuan Desert. Learn from experts about xeric, native plants that are great low water choices in our region, and enjoy refreshments at the Friends House. Cost-free. Reservations not required.

4th Annual Field Day
For kids aged 7-13 and their adult chaperones. Four interactive stations along the Rio Viejo Trail allow kids to connect with nature and practice archery, photography, atlatl ancient spear throwing, and animal tracking. Cost-free. Must pre-register at BdAFIELDDay@gmail.com. Limited to 48 kids.

Spring Wildlife Zone
Family Fun on the refuge plaza and in the Visitor Center’s Lannan Room. This event is filled with interactive, educational exhibits (i.e., herpetology, biology, fire, native fish, and face painting) which are open to kids of all ages. Cost-free. Reservations not required.

Annual Friends Meeting
Join us to learn the latest Friends’ and refuge news, while enjoying music and refreshments at our yearly meeting for all our friends. Cost-free. Reservations not required.

30th Annual Festival of the Cranes
Come celebrate the return of sandhill cranes to Bosque del Apache. This nationally recognized wildlife, birding, and photography festival offers 160 event sessions in 6 days. Festival catalog available mid-August. Session costs vary. Pre-registration required, and Friends members may register 1 day earlier than others. Call 575-835-2448 for more information.

Wildlife Zone @ Festival of the Cranes
Family Fun during Festival of the Cranes weekend. See raptors and reptiles up close; participate in duck banding, hikes, archery, and the young birder tour; and learn about conservation, wilderness, Native American dance, and more. Cost-free. Reservations not required.

2nd Annual Holiday Open House (formerly known as Cranes, Candles, Carolers, Cookies, and Cocoa)
Community event for families to view migratory birds on the refuge before sunset and then come to the Visitor Center to celebrate the holidays with luminarias, lights, traditional New Mexican holiday foods, and caroling! Enjoy great holiday shopping in Bosque Nature Store, with some discounts and free gift wrapping. Cost-free. Reservations not required.

Bosque Photo Intensives
Experience the refuge through a different lens by attending these premiere field and classroom photography workshops. These workshops improve students’ skills with professional instruction; long lens loaners available. Limited to 15 participants in December, and 27 in January. Workshop costs vary. Pre-registration required.

Bosque Nature Store End-of-Season Sale
When the cranes and geese head north, prices head south on some Nature Store merchandise! Come enjoy great bargains at our 2-3 day end-of-season sale!

Planned Date

Tuesdays, March 14 - May 9
May be viewed anytime after each episode launches.

Saturdays, March 4 - May 27
8:15 - 11:15 AM

Saturday, April 1
7:30 - 9:30 PM

Saturday, April 29
8:30 AM - 1:30 PM

Saturday, April 29
1:00 - 3:30 PM

Saturday, September 16,
Starting at 10 AM

Tuesday-Sunday,
November 14 - 19

Friday-Sunday,
November 17 - 19

Friday, December 8
Starting at 5 PM

Friday-Sunday,
December 8 - 10, 2017 &
Thursday-Sunday,
January 4 - 7, 2018

Starting Friday
Feb 9 or 16, 2018
In one of my first impressions when I started volunteering at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge (BdA), my fellow new volunteers and I are in a van, getting a tour of the refuge. The van turns onto the south tour loop. “That’s Hank Heron over on our right,” says our guide. “Hank is kind of the refuge’s unofficial welcoming committee.” I can’t help but smile to myself. Hank Heron. Welcome to BdA. I think I’m going to like it here.

Our volunteer training was far more extensive than just Hank. We heard lectures on the history of the refuge, biology, ecology, and, of course, birds - all of the moving parts that go into making the BdA function. We were given extensive training on the various reasons visitors come to the refuge and how to best serve their needs. It was both exciting and overwhelming at first, but I immediately felt the refuge staff’s strong sense of commitment to create a positive experience for volunteers and visitors alike. And we were introduced to the invaluable role the Friends of the Bosque del Apache plays in the vitality of the refuge.

I continued to learn new things daily from staff, other volunteers, and visitors. I especially valued the sharing by visitors who have known and loved the refuge for many years. I love how the information and passion flowed from one person to another, and I was happy to take my place in this circle. In exchange for my time, I not only received an education and a chance to explore new areas and meet new people, but most importantly, I also had the privilege of waking up at BdA to gorgeous sunrises, flocks of sandhill cranes and light geese flying overhead, the sounds of thousands of birds, and the ever-changing colors of the plants in the landscape. BdA is a magical, awe-inspiring place. I feel so fortunate for the time that I got to spend here.

In the evenings, my wife and I were so excited to share what we had seen that day: A turkey vulture, a whole family of javelinas, or various species of birds that I was eventually able to identify. When I arrived at BdA, I couldn’t tell a harrier from a hamburger. I’m now able to make that distinction and more. Wildlife aside, I am amazed and delighted by the physical place that comprises BdA: The landscape. The colors. The quality of light. The stars. The mountains and rock formations. Desert plants that look like something out of Dr. Seuss. And Hank Heron presiding over it all.

My time here, nearly five months, has been a transformative experience. My understanding of the world and my role in it has deepened. I’ll carry this new perspective into future volunteer and life experiences. Tomorrow is our last day at BdA. I’ll meditate in the Desert Arboretum. I’ll drive the tour loops once more, marvel at how the colors have changed almost overnight, watch the new birds that are migrating in for spring, try to catch a glimpse at the elusive mammals that populate the refuge, and say goodbye for now to all my new friends. I know I’ll return to BdA. How could I not? When I do, I know Hank Heron will be here to greet me.
FRIENDS OF THE BOSQUE DEL APACHE
Membership Application

Name

Family Members (for Family Membership)

Street       City   State    Zip

Phone

Email

☐ I want to hear about volunteer opportunities at the refuge.
☐ I want to receive emails (<2/month) about current events and issues at the refuge.
☐ Please contact me about planned giving.

Please send your contribution to:
Friends of the Bosque del Apache
PO Box 340
San Antonio, NM 87832

2017 Membership Levels:
☐ Snow Goose (Individual) $25
☐ Northern Harrier (Family) $50
☐ Sandhill Crane $120
☐ Peregrine Falcon $250
☐ Golden Eagle $1000
☐ Business Sponsor $350
☐ Corporate Sponsor $500
☐ Eco-travel Sponsor $500
☐ Professional Photographer $500

New levels will take effect in April 2017.