Spring Migration: Pelicans, Phalaropes, Warblers, Oh My!

American white pelicans. Photo by John Olson

As I write this the end of April, the spring migration is in full swing with white-faced ibis in every wetland and huge swirls of American white pelicans numbering in the hundreds passing overhead. New shorebirds appear daily and may be gone as suddenly, but others hang around for a few days or weeks. The season’s first spotted sandpipers have appeared along with the first Wilson’s phalaropes spinning among the ducks north of the Flight Deck. Willets, American avocets, and black-necked stilts have been spotted regularly for a few weeks along with small flocks of least sandpipers and the occasional western and semi-palmated sandpipers. An uncommon snowy plover was here for a few weeks, and there have been reports of long-bill curlew and other less common shorebirds as well. Every day can bring something new on the strong southwesterly winds.

Warblers are a common sight at this time. Lucy’s and yellow warblers and common yellowthroat all nest on the refuge and are joined this time of year by orange-crowned, the bright yellow Wilson’s, and Virginia’s warblers. Yellow-rumped warblers, who spend the winter here, have molted into their bright black and yellow plumage and are gathering in large numbers prior to departing for higher elevations where they nest. Soon warbler-mania will engulf the refuge as birders across the state arrive to locate the rarer migrants, such as Townsend’s and hermit warblers and the even more elusive eastern warblers, such as hooded, black and white, and American redstart. Anything is possible this time of year.
May is the best time of year to see neotropical migrants. You might see yellow-breasted chat, blue grosbeak, the orange and black Bullock’s oriole, and the electric-red vermilion flycatcher that nest on the refuge—the males are singing loudly to attract a mate and are very visible. Once the females have laid eggs, the males become silent and are much harder to locate.

Sunset is the time to be at the Old Rookery at the east end of Bosque Road. Sit quietly in your vehicle and watch the spectacle as the white egrets—great with yellow bill and black feet, snowy with black bill and yellow feet, and the occasional cattle with yellow bill and feet—pour in to join the neotropical cormorants to spend the night. You may see the much smaller green heron also, as it is again nesting in the cattails in the NW corner of the Old Rookery. Wait a few minutes after sunset and the rookery will suddenly fill with blackbirds, but look closely as these are Brewer’s blackbirds; males are all black with a bright yellow eye and the females are chocolate brown. At some preordained time a few minutes after sunset, the entire flock will circle and dive into the cattails to join the green heron. A few red-winged blackbirds and great-tailed grackles also roost in the Old Rookery.

You can also see some wonderful raptors. Three great horned owl nests can be seen along the auto tour route; all have recently hatched young that will fledge mid-to-late May. The Swainson’s hawk pair have been seen back in the woodlot where they nested last year, and the common black-hawk has returned and is often found hunting in the open area west of the North Seasonal Road, which was burned last year and is now a bright green savannah wetland. The northern harrier likes this open area to hunt in also; however, it hunts on the wing rather than from a perch. Also in this open area of few trees, you can see American kestrals along with the occasional red-tailed hawk. Most of the hawks, though, have headed north for the summer, along with most of the ducks, leaving some gadwalls and ruddy ducks behind and a few pairs of the locally breeding Mexican ducks, currently a subspecies of the mallard. Mexican ducks are most commonly identified by what appear to be two female mallards hanging around together. Look closely at the bills, though, and you will see that one has an orange bill (the female) and one has a bright greenish-yellow bill (the male). Unlike the mallard, the male Mexican duck will stay with the female year-round and even helps to raise the young. Mexican ducks are often found in the canals and ditches or in the impoundments with emergent vegetation around the edges, where they prefer to go unnoticed.

Late spring is a great time to visit the refuge as each new day has the potential to bring something new. This year’s surprise bird was a male black scoter, a bird much more at home in salt water, now #403 for the refuge checklist. It touched down for about five hours and a few lucky birders were able to see it. Fortunately, one was a photographer with a long lens who captured a wonderful photo of the bird north of the Flight Deck and shared it with refuge staff. Thank you, Al Wallace of El Paso, Texas.

Come spend some time at Bosque del Apache this spring and see what you can find: both old familiar birds and new species for your list.

- Cathie Sandell, USFWS Volunteer
Spring is here, the trees are turning green, the butterflies are out, and the water on the refuge is disappearing. This can mean only one thing . . . it’s drawdown season! Many wonder why the water sits so long on the wetlands this time of year, April and May, and why the water is so shallow. It’s a strategic management tool that refuge staff use to ensure productive wetlands that are able to feed the thousands of cranes, ducks, and geese in the wintertime. The whole year and winter season depend on how effective the spring drawdowns are in the wetlands. This is the most critical time of the year.

So what exactly is a drawdown and what does it do? The purpose of drawdowns is to get plants to germinate in the soil. Nothing in the wetlands is ever planted—it naturally emanates from the seed bank in the ground. The refuge staff manage the wetlands to encourage the germination of the seeds that are already in the soil and produce the many desirable plants that provide food for the birds each winter. However, the refuge staff also have to manage undesirable plants, such as cocklebur. Each plant germinates under specific conditions, mostly related to temperature. So each wetland is drawn down at different dates throughout April and May depending on which plants the refuge staff is managing in that unit. Each wetland is uniquely different here on the refuge: some have sandy soils, while some have clay; some are shaded by trees, while some are more exposed to the sun; and some are three-feet deep, while others are shallow by inches. This means each wetland produces or germinates different plants, which is why not every wetland has water drawn down at the same time.

We now know that each wetland can produce different plants; but how do we get those desirable plants and not cocklebur? It can take a very long time from the moment a wetland is full of water to the day it is empty. Depending on the size of a wetland, it can take 10-40 days to drain or drawdown. The purpose of the slow drawdown is to keep the soils saturated. This allows those seeds to germinate and establish roots in the soil. Also, this may be the last time that a wetland has water until it rains in July, so those roots need to be as long and established as possible to reach groundwater. The slow process allows those desirable plants to germinate in abundance. If the water were pulled off quickly, the soil would dry out fast and be exposed to a lot of sun; this would promote the abundance of cocklebur. Timing is everything!

Drawdowns also benefit birds. During a drawdown, the water concentrates in shallow pools; this allows ducks to feed on bugs or invertebrates. While ducks are here all winter, they are foraging on the seeds produced by the plants; but in spring, they shift to invertebrates. This is important in their life cycle because they are getting ready to breed and lay eggs. This requires lots of energy, which they get from protein in the invertebrates.

Wetlands are vitally important to many species at all times of the year. So when you see all the birds on the refuge in winter foraging in the wetlands, you know that it is a result of successful drawdowns in the spring.

- Megan Goyette, Refuge Staff Biologist
Our recent winter and spring have brought changes to the Desert Arboretum, mostly good ones, including a successful annual Arboretum Stroll and expansion of the Pollinator Project. But we did suffer some cacti losses.

As I look back at last winter, I realize that there were more gray days and the temperature was colder than in past winters. We didn’t have extreme low temperatures, only in the 10-15 degree range, but they were cold enough that we had some significant cacti losses. Almost all the yellow-spined bunny ears (Opuntia microdasys) froze, as did a bunny ears hybrid. These losses are hard to accept, but we know that they are inevitable when we have cacti in the garden that have very little cold tolerance.

The spring season began with a very successful Desert Arboretum Stroll. The seventy or so visitors enjoyed guided tours and, right on schedule, the New Mexico Claret Cup Cactus and the Banana Yuccas began blooming. Now we have Torrey’s Yucca, Bonker’s Hedgehog, Feather Dalea, and Mormon Tea all in flower. I’m keeping watch on the agaves because with the recent rainfall, I expect one or more of the larger plants to flower.

The Pollinator Project is gearing up for another growing season. Our plan is to dramatically increase the number of flowering plants in and around the arboretum. We have flats of little cacti purchased last fall and will soon purchase flats of up to fifteen species of wildflowers. The cacti will be used for both replacements and finally to finish the north side of the Arboretum. The wildflowers will be planted in beds around the plaza (the large open area northwest of the visitor center). We are working closely with the refuge staff on selection of species, location of beds, and use of volunteer time for watering. The “plant rule” on the refuge is that no new plant species can be brought onto the refuge unless it has already been found on the refuge. And, of course, the species must be available commercially either as seed or a transplant. Our final list is twenty-one species, including blanket flower, chocolate flower, desert zinnia and desert marigold. Some flower beds will require fencing so that the rabbits don’t immediately eat them. And they will require water. We currently have 2200 gallons of stored rainwater, and in the last week of April, we installed two of our three additional water tanks to give us a capacity of almost 3800 gallons. All this is made possible—the fencing, water tanks, flowers—because of the Petschek family’s generous donation, 2017-2019.

All in all, winter at the Desert Arboretum was a bit harsh, but spring is exciting with blooming cacti and the continuation and expansion of flowering plants for the Pollinator Project. Come and enjoy this vibrant area of the refuge.

-Tom Hyden, Friends Master Gardener and USFWS Volunteer
In my travels, I have visited over 150 of our national wildlife refuges. Though many of these have the same reason for being created (often, providing habitat for migratory waterfowl), each refuge strikes me as quite unique. The national wildlife refuge system includes gems on our landscape that much of the public often under-appreciate or under-explore. At Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), we are especially blessed with a refuge that offers wonders of many varieties and that changes with the seasons and the climate.

Most visitors see the great things on the auto tour loop, such as sandhill cranes, geese, ducks, mule deer, javelina, and the like. As a volunteer here, I have been given the opportunity to lead hikes during Spring, one on the Canyon Trail and one on the Marsh Trail. Each trail provides wonderful views of aspects of this refuge that might be missed by the casual visitor. Indeed, each trail at Bosque del Apache NWR is different from the others. From open cottonwoods to dense cottonwoods to dry uplands and vertical cliffs, each trail reveals varied habitats that give us a great variety of plants and animals.

The Canyon Trail, for example, gives us a look into those dry uplands. I see plants and animals (including birds) there that I almost never see in the lusher parts of the refuge. As an example, the black-throated sparrow is easily found along the Canyon Trail but is almost never seen along the auto tour loop. This sparrow is well adapted to the dry uplands found on this part of the refuge. While many species of animals seek shelter from extreme heat by finding shade, this sparrow has been reported to enter one of the many holes in the ground for an even better cooling opportunity!

I have found it very interesting to see how one year differs from the previous year here in the Chihuahuan Desert. Sometimes that seems to relate to how much moisture there was the previous season or perhaps how cold the winter was. Over the past eight springs here at the refuge, we have had huge flower blooms a couple of times, but even in the driest spring, I have found flowers. That may mean getting down on my knees to get good looks at them, though!

In 2018, I stayed at the refuge into the summer, when we had some remarkable rains. Suddenly the night was alive with the sounds of the frog known as Couch's Spadefoot. These frogs (sometimes called toads) stay buried in the ground for most of the year. They come out when they sense enough rain has fallen. They mate at night, their eggs hatch in about 36 hours, and their young mature within nine days! Truly the desert is alive, even if we don’t see all that is going on!

Bosque del Apache is worth visiting time and time again and at different times of day and different seasons, in order to enjoy and marvel at its many and varied inhabitants.

- Wayne Washam, USFWS Volunteer
Three years have sped by as a Bosque del Apache (BdA) volunteer, teaching environmental education through music at San Antonio Elementary School. Both the students and I have had a lot of fun and learned so much.

The first year, I worked with the first/second grade students. They learned about the environment, particularly about birds, by moving, singing, listening, playing, and creating sounds. For example, they vocally imitated birds, and they performed their bird “songs” at the BdA Visitor Center for Earth Day.

The second year, as the students grew into second and third graders, I created lessons for them that included the study of animal migration. By the third year, the students created their own music about “beautiful bats” and twilight animals.

Over these three years, I have observed how much the students are “in tune” and aware of their environment. Thanks to bus scholarships, made possible by your donations to Friends of Bosque del Apache, the San Antonio students have enjoyed visits to the refuge once a month during the school year for hands-on instruction. These refuge visits bring to life what they study in the classroom.

The fourth and fifth grade students have had a really exciting project. They have raised seven species of fish in their classroom aquarium, which they will release into the Rio Grande in May. They have written haikus and created instrumental music about their fish. As the students and I have watched the fish grow and mature, I have realized how the students have matured in their knowledge of the environment and how their music skills have blossomed over the last few years.

**White Sucker**
by Madison Lopez, Isiah Estrada, Matthew Lopez

- fish eating algae
- dwells at the bottom gravel
- sticky eggs sink down

**Red Shiner**
by Esperanza Lopez, Floyd S. III, Amarissa Lopez

- Swims in the river
- Bright and beautiful Red fins
- Stalking a small bug

The past two years, I have met with all K-5 students and have created music lessons about the environment. You may wonder what happens in an environmental education music class, and it is difficult to explain. But just imagine how the cranes dance, the birds sing, and the fish swim and grow. Now picture children doing the same types of things through music with joy and creativity.

Through continued environmental education, the children in this community will one day become knowledgeable caretakers of fish and wildlife. They may become biologists, ornithologists, entomologists, or even refuge managers—one may even become manager of Bosque del Apache!

- Cathy Ameling, USFWS Volunteer
Friends staff capitalized on two opportunities to advocate for Bosque del Apache within our local and regional communities: New Mexico Lands, Water & Wildlife Day and the Public Lands Alliance (PLA) Conference and Trade Show. Both were important occasions for networking with like-minded public lands nonprofit groups and helped us reach parts of our mission, namely to partner with organizations that contribute to the advancement of the refuge, that educate about environmental concerns, that practice wildlife management and conservation, and that advocate for relevant conservation and preservation issues. (As many of you may already know from previous Bosque Watch articles, Friends’ mission is SPEAR—support, partner, educate, advocate, and research.)

New Mexico Lands, Water & Wildlife Day, hosted by Sierra Club inside the Rotunda of the Round House in Santa Fe, was a day set aside for NM constituents to learn about some of the public lands bills being proposed, discussed, and voted on this legislative session. Constituents were also afforded an easy opportunity to meet, converse with, and even lobby their representatives about these bills. Friends was one of about fifty groups that were invited to participate by running an information table. We interacted with legislators, the public, and other local public lands nonprofit groups, learned about some of the current issues surrounding our New Mexico public lands, met some of our local representatives and legislators, as well as members of the public who were in attendance, and, most importantly, we advocated for Bosque del Apache and Friends in a very visible way. It was a great time to see and be seen, make connections, and learn from and with some of our state’s other wonderful conservation groups!

The Public Lands Alliance (PLA) Conference and Trade Show, held in Denver during the last week of February, was another great opportunity for staff to represent Friends of Bosque del Apache. The PLA’s mission is to “connect, strengthen and represent the nonprofit partners of America’s public lands,” and the conference was an intensive public lands nonprofit boot camp, if you will, with more than fifty workshops, facilitated discussions, and keynote presentations. Each day was filled with a variety of classes and workshops, all tailored towards best practices and the unique experiences that public lands supporters share. We attended sessions packed full of information pertinent to the specific needs of public lands nonprofit partners—everything from accounting and advertising to grant writing and building grassroots support. We picked up many new and useful ideas and methods: we networked and exchanged ideas with a wide range of groups from all over the country, both massive (like Zion, Yellowstone, and Grand Canyon) and those just starting out. Being in one shared location gave us all the chance to pick one another’s brains and swap ideas and tips and tricks that work.

The conference also hosted a fantastic trade show custom tailored to the special retail needs of nonprofit agency partners like us. Most products being showcased were USA made, eco friendly, organic, all natural or recycled, and already pre-approved for sale at National Park Service sites, making it easier for our store staff to find great new products that will fit the niche we occupy. Come visit Bosque Nature Store during your next visit and check out what’s new!

We came away from the experience feeling sharpened, affirmed, and supported in the work that we are doing by a community that is very much like a family, all participants in the new “geography of hope.” As Aldo Leopold said, “When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

- Trisha Sanchez, Membership Care Manager, Friends of Bosque del Apache NWR
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