



# WHEELER WILDLIFE WATCH

*The Quarterly Newsletter of the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association*



PHOTO COURTESY  
OF  
RONNIE MAUM

## BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING DUCKS

*Dendrocygna autumnalis*

**Boisterous and gaudy with brilliant red/orange bills and unusual long-legged silhouettes, these ducks are among the few that actually perch or nest in trees, and they have recently been seen on Wheeler NWR! See page 2 for more details!**

WHEELER NATIONAL  
WILDLIFE REFUGE

## Calendar of Events Summer 2020

VISITOR CENTER  
256.350.6639

### Important Notice

**All summer calendar events have been cancelled to help slow the spread of COVID-19. Please stay tuned to the refuge website and Facebook pages to stay up-to-date as conditions change.**

### FROM THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER.. *Mary Ratliff*

**W**e all certainly hope our area will soon turn the corner regarding a reduction in C-19 cases and that people will have recovered. That would be especially heartening! The Visitor Center has been shuttered and social distancing has made it difficult at best to make arrangements for our next festival (and just about everything our refuge does that entails crowds) not knowing from one week to the next if these activities will be cancelled.

Even with that dismal thought we have all our major speakers and performers booked except for the musician. We are especially excited about hosting Ben

Raines, environmental journalist and filmmaker, Lauren McGough, the falconer who specializes in hunting with golden eagles, renowned photography and author Paul Bannick, Joe Wiegand portraying Teddy Roosevelt, award-winning Native American flutist Gareth Laffely, and our ever popular raptor program, as well as our regular local participants.

As almost all recent functions had to be recorded or otherwise cancelled, we are planning to video all our programs so as to ensure the show(s) will proceed with or without spectators (We surely hope that is not the case!!). **Prez's Corner cont'd, page 2.....**

## Welcome, Nicole Mashburn!



WWRA is delighted to have Nicole Mashburn join our board! A Hartselle resident, Nicole has taught biology, human anatomy and physiology at Calhoun for the past ten years. Prior to that she also served as an environmental educator for Morgan County Soil & Water Conservation. She brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to Friends of Wheeler Refuge!

## BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING DUCKS

*by David Young, Wheeler NWR Ranger*

**B**etween the size of a large duck and a small goose, the black-bellied whistling-duck is a bird that, when observed, is hard to mistake for anything else. Both males and females look alike and have long legs, a long neck, and a bright red/orange bill. Their back and chest is a chestnut color, and as their name suggests they have a black belly. These cavity nesting birds are found year round in parts of Central and South America, southern Arizona, southern Texas, and Florida. In recent years in the United States, these ducks have been expanding their range northward into places like eastern Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. In this northerly part of their breeding range, they are migratory – spending their winters further south, many in coastal southern Texas.



*Photo courtesy of  
Tina Brazzeal*

While not common, these ducks have been seen in north Alabama and on the refuge and have been observed more frequently the last several years. If you do spot them, there's a good chance you'll find them perched on a tree branch. The ducks prefer to nest in tree cavities or nest boxes, but will build a nest on the ground if no cavities are available. Their nesting habits are similar to those of wood ducks in the sense that they lay 9-18 eggs in the nest cavity, and usually within a day of hatching the young birds jump out of

the tree following their mother. Female black-bellied whistling-ducks are known to exhibit a behavior known as egg-dumping, that is, laying eggs in the nests of other whistling ducks. Not so long ago, I witnessed one of these ducks doing just that...

Before coming to Wheeler NWR, I spent several years working at Red River NWR in NW Louisiana. A partnership with The Friends of Red River NWR and Exodus

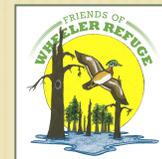
Stored Energy made it possible for the refuge to install a camera inside one of the wood duck nesting boxes at Red River NWR. You can view some of the past video clips that are archived at [www.fws.gov/refuge/Red\\_River/cameras/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Red_River/cameras/). There you'll find footage from a pair of nesting Black-bellied Whistling Ducks from the spring of 2019 including one clip of a 2<sup>nd</sup> hen egg dumping in the nest box. Finally, if you're wondering where they get the name "whistling duck" check out your favorite online bird guide and listen to their call. Whether you watch the birds online or get lucky enough to spot one in the wild, enjoy watching this unique bird!



*Egg Dumping  
Photo courtesy of  
Red River NWR Web Cam*

## WANTED! WEBSITE VOLUNTEER

Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association is seeking a volunteer with basic website editing experience. This volunteer's primary role would be to communicate with WWRA board members and refuge staff to keep the WWRA website current and functional. Interested volunteers should contact Mary Lee Ratliff at [maryleerat48@gmail.com](mailto:maryleerat48@gmail.com)



The WWRA website is:  
[friendsofwheelerrefuge.com](http://friendsofwheelerrefuge.com)

### **Prez's Corner, cont'd from page 1.....**

It's already starting to feel like summer and we know everyone is so grateful to get outside again to enjoy their normal activities. According to NatGeo, birding has absolutely exploded—so how fortunate are we to have our refuge continue to be available for anyone to experience this pleasure!

Don't forget to check out the refuge and association websites and Facebook pages for refuge information including maps, trail guides, gate schedules, and upcoming events. Take a moment to walk a trail or sit on a bench and relish the tranquility that envelops Wheeler. *That* we know will always be here for everyone!

## QUICK UPDATES FROM WHEELER NWR

*By Ricky Ingram, Project Manager*

**A**s you all know most everyone's world got flipped upside down in March with the Coronavirus pandemic and now the widespread protests and rioting throughout the U.S. Frankly, my peace of mind is greatly enhanced by coming to work at Wheeler NWR on most days and not thinking too much about current world events. Yes, there are job stresses, like our only Manager Keith Westlake at Mountain Longleaf NWR in Anniston transferring this month with no replacement in sight due to budget shortfalls. We did get to fill our first ever Equipment Operator there three weeks before the manager left. Two other key supervisory positions likely are retiring by the end of the year and additional funding cuts are projected that may not allow replacements anytime soon. Our \$5M of Infrastructure Projects are still filled with red tape, government bureaucracy, Corona delays, and have been one of the biggest headaches of my 37 year career, but we continue to try to push it forward. Also, to top it off, our only Budget/Admin position just accepted a Regional Fire Budget position this week that will be stationed at Wheeler, but the loss of that position impacts everything we do related to budgets. All that said, I haven't gotten Coronavirus or at least not yet. My family is relatively healthy, I wake up every morning, at least so far, and God is still in control. Our leaders seem to have forgotten this at times, but I haven't.

We were very fortunate in the Southeast Region as our Leaders allowed Refuge Staff to keep working on mission critical work and protection of the public and facilities so long as we were able to either telework or socially distance ourselves. Refuges in some other

Regions are still not allowed to do anything but telework and can't even go into work. Everything we do at Wheeler NWR with our limited and dedicated staff falls under one of the approved categories, so everyone has kept working. We did mostly send our loyal volunteers home as we closed the Visitor Center and cancelled our summer schedule of events. The VC remains closed until the area Corona cases stabilize and start trending downward. We are following the guidance from the Governor and State Health Department so stay tuned for further word on when we may be able to reopen the Center. Our VC staff has continued to work on developing education programs for Social Media, future school group programs, updating our websites and information, general upkeep and maintenance on trails and visitor facilities, plus new plans for exhibit replacements.

The maintenance crew has been very busy repairing roads and culverts from our second winter in a row of flooding. Mowing and bush hogging are weekly events now and the spring rains and warm temperatures have made the grass and crops planted really grow fast. It seems like there are more trees that fall on Wheeler NWR than anywhere in the world and heavy rains and wind just don't help in our wetland habitat conditions. I'm not sure why but the dang trees always seem to find a road to fall across. Our LE folks have been very busy as I'm estimating our visitation for this time of year has probably tripled with schools and jobs closed and most people staying home with few places they can go. The Refuge has provided a much needed relief for many families during the past three months, and people are everywhere

hiking, biking, riding, having picnics, boating, kayaking, fishing, bird watching, and just getting outside in the sunshine. We have kept everything open except the VC and just asked people to socially distance. Most visitors seemed to do this well for their own safety.

Our biological crew has been very busy clearing beaver dams and moving water off the trees and out of the agriculture fields to allow planting. We added three temporary biotech college students plus one volunteer college student in early May and all have helped out a lot. We have had an archaeological contractor doing work on the refuge for the last six weeks to hopefully clear the sites for construction of some of our new public use trails and buildings. This is a big step forward in actually getting some construction started, "maybe - no promises" in the spring. This summer we have four YCC high school students working for eight weeks on the refuge. Three of last year's Have returned so this will be an experienced crew plus our YCC leader returns. They did great work for us last year on small maintenance projects, facility cleanup, wood duck banding, and trash removal. We are looking forward to another great summer from them. A couple of these youth are now strongly considering college with natural resource majors so we may have to work them harder this year to truly test their grit.

The Refuge is still moving forward through these challenging times and has been a great blessing to many new and previous visitors who have needed an outdoor place to roam and ponder things besides the news and world events. Take care, stay safe, enjoy the Refuge, and only five months till migration occurs!



Blue Dasher Dragonfly  
*Pachydiplax longipennis*  
Photo courtesy of George Lee

National Wildlife Refuge Associations are independent non-profit organizations whose mission is to conserve America's wildlife heritage for future generations through strategic programs that protect, enhance, and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System and the landscapes beyond its boundaries that secure its ecological integrity.

Won't you please join us?

## MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

If you have not renewed your membership for 2020, please show your support by sending in your tax deductible renewal donation or give a loved one or friend the gift of membership!  
We really need your support!

### FRIEND OF WHEELER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY, STATE & ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

STUDENT: \$15 \_\_\_\_, INDIVIDUAL: \$20 \_\_\_\_, FAMILY: \$25 \_\_\_\_,  
LIFETIME: \$250 \_\_\_\_\_, BENEFACTOR: \$500 \_\_\_\_\_,  
PATRON: \$1,000 \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE MAIL YOUR TAX DEDUCTIBLE MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL  
TO:  
WWRA  
P.O. Box 239  
DECATUR, AL 35603



### WHEELER WILDLIFE WATCH

WHEELER WILDLIFE REFUGE ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 239

DECATUR, ALABAMA 35603

### VISIT OUR WEBSITES!

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge  
<http://www.fws.gov/wheeler/>

Wheeler Wildlife Refuge Association  
<http://www.friendsofwheelerrefuge.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/WheelerNWRComplex/>

[facebook.com/Wheeler-Wildlife-Refuge-Association](https://www.facebook.com/Wheeler-Wildlife-Refuge-Association)  
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It's the same Amazon.com you know—same products, same prices—and 0.5% of each purchase price is donated back to WWRA. And it doesn't cost you anything! On your first visit to AmazonSmile ([smile.amazon.com](http://smile.amazon.com)), you will be prompted to select a charitable organization from a list of eligible organizations. Just type in **Wheeler Wildlife Refuge**

**Association**, search, select, and you're finished! Now when you shop, go to **smile.amazon.com** and you will be generating donations to your refuge association with every purchase. Support **WWRA** every time you buy with AmazonSmile!