



Photo by Karen Kilfeather



# Canyonlands Crier

Spring 2011

## Hog Heaven

In February we planned to have the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Division of Wildlife Services, shoot feral hogs from their helicopter for one day. We were planning on trying this method to reduce the number of feral hogs at the refuge. We wanted to compare the success, efficiency, and cost effectiveness with our current control methods (live trapping and opportunistic shooting) with aerial shooting. If the results were favorable, we were going to write a new hog control plan incorporating aerial shooting using the services provided by USDA.

Feral hogs are not native to North America and are an invasive species that causes untold damage to wildlife, habitat, field croplands, and riparian areas. They prey on goat kids, fawns, and ground nesting birds (quail, turkey, meadow larks, sparrows, etc.), lizards, snakes, and turtles. They also compete with deer and turkey for limited resources such as mast (pecans, acorns) and other forage. Their rooting and wallowing damages roads, pond dams, spoils watering holes, and generally weakens riparian habitats.

Spanish explorers are believed to have brought the first pigs to America in the 1500s. Hogs have been domesticated for thousands of years. As a result, they are very adaptable and have a relatively high reproductive rate. This adds up to trouble for native wildlife. It is estimated that there are over 2 million feral hogs in Texas. They occur in all but a handful of counties and it's only a matter of time before they will be throughout the State.

Feral hogs have either escaped on their own, or were released for 'free roam farming' and allowed to fend for themselves before being trapped and taken to market. Others were released to provide for increased hunting opportunity in a misguided belief this would improve hunting.

Many of you may remember Arnold Ziffel, the cute little Yorkshire pig, on Green Acres. Not only was he cute, he was smart. Pigs are usually rated 4th in overall intelligence, behind apes, toothed whales (dolphins) and elephants. Some scientists say they have the intelligence of a 3 year-old child. Note however, that on an individual basis, it is possible for a particular dog to be "smarter" than a particular pig and so on. Owners of pot-bellied pigs brag about how smart they are.

Given their adaptability and their intelligence, it isn't surprising that hogs are hard to trap. During hunting season, they become more nocturnal and stay in heavy brush during shooting hours. They learn that hog traps can be dangerous. Usually you will only trap a couple of hogs (the naive ones) before the others learn to

avoid the traps. We will never completely eliminate hogs, but we can keep their numbers down and reduce the damage and negative impacts to our native wildlife species.

Due to the many negative comments about aerial shooting being cruel to the hogs, we decided to postpone the project until we can rewrite our plan and include other invasive animals besides hogs, like nutria (a large aquatic rodent). We will have more meetings, gather more public input, and hope we can allay concerns that aerial shooting is not an acceptable control method for feral hogs.

## Other Refuge News

Chuck Sexton, Wildlife Biologist, birder and naturalist extraordinaire, retired on December 31 after 16 excitement filled years as our biologist. While we will miss him as our Biologist, we will enjoy his help as a refuge volunteer. While Chuck's binoculars will be hard to carry, we were very fortunate and hired Scott Rowin as his replacement. Scott is the current Preserve Manager for the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve in Austin. Previously, he was a Biologist with the Austin Ecological Field Office. He and his wife and son live in Lago Vista.

Mike Wilson, our Engineering Equipment Operator, retired at the end of February. Mike and his wife Vicky will retire to southern Arizona. We will be allowed to fill his position with another heavy equipment operator.

The Golden-cheeked Warblers arrived back in Central Texas right on time. The Black-capped Vireos will arrive a little later, by the end of March. Public use is increasing at Warbler Vista, Doeskin Ranch, and the Shin Oak Observation Deck. The Shin Oak deck will be closed from March 21 - April 8 to allow the Vireos to settle into their nesting routine. If you visit Warbler Vista, please be careful driving down the entrance road. It's a steep gravel road, so go slow. We will be re-working the road this month.

Deborah Holle, *Refuge Manager*



Photo credit: John Harrington

**Balcones Songbird Festival • April 29-May 2, 2011**  
**Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge • Lago Vista, Texas**

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| <p><b>Friday, April 29</b><br/> <b>Wine &amp; Star Shine</b><br/> <i>Benefit &amp; Silent Auction</i></p> <p>5:30pm <b>Sculpture Stroll</b> with the Texas Society of Sculptors.</p> <p>6:30pm <b>Chef Sean Fulford</b> pairings to complement Flat Creek Estate award winning wines.</p> <p>At Dusk <b>Jeffery Phillips</b> will provide tales and lights of the sky.</p> <p align="center"><i>Join us for lunch and visit our MarketPlace all weekend!</i></p> | <p><b>Friday-Monday</b><br/> <b>April 29-May 2</b><br/> <b>BIRDING &amp; NATURE TOURS</b></p> <p>Premium Tours by VENT &amp; FIELD GUIDES</p> <p>Signature Tours by TAS</p> <p><b>Young Beginning Birders (12-18 yrs)</b></p> <p>Nature Tours on Wildflowers &amp; Native Earthscapes</p> <p>See the entire lineup online!</p> | <p><b>Sunday, May 1</b><br/> <b>FREE FAMILY EVENTS</b></p> <p><b>Last Chance Forever Raptor Show</b><br/>         12:00 pm &amp; 2:00 pm</p> <p><b>Get your Nature Ranger Passport</b><br/>         1:00 pm - 5:00pm<br/>         ~Nature crafts &amp; games &amp; more!<br/>         ~See live animals! Be a Jr. Firefighter!</p> <p><b>Spider Hunt with Joe Lapp</b><br/>         starts at 1:00pm</p> <p><b>Watch the Birdy</b><br/>         starts at 1:15 pm</p> <p><b>It's a Pond's Life</b><br/>         starts at 3:00 pm</p> |
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To see a full listing of all events and to register visit our website or call  
**www.balconessongbirdfestival.org • (512) 965-2473**

## Annual Appeal a Success

The Board of Directors of the **National Fish and Wildlife Foundation** recently approved a grant of \$5,000 to *Friends of Balcones* to support saving the native Texas Warbler. This grant is provided on the condition that these funds be matched dollar for dollar by donations from our members. More than 50% of members have participated in the Annual Campaign for 2010-11. If you have already participated in the campaign, **thank you!** If you haven't made your gift yet, please consider making a donation today to help us qualify for this matching grant. Time is running out...we have until **May 31, 2011** to raise the matching funds and be eligible for the full grant award. To make a contribution go to [www.friendsofbalcones.org](http://www.friendsofbalcones.org).

## Register for TOURS on-line

Register online for Balcones Songbird Festival premium tours with Field Guides, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Travis Audubon Society and the American Birding Conservancy. By popular demand Texas Parks & Wildlife is conducting a Young Beginning Birders tour for ages 12-18. Sign up for Wildflower Identification led by the Native Plant Society of Texas, or check out Native Plants in the Landscape with NativeEarthscapes.

Bring your friends and enjoy the tours with nature experts who can help you see the endangered songbirds, unique native plants and wildlife in the natural habitat of the Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge.

## Diane Sherrill Landscaping

The Refuge "screening" project was completed by Diane Sherrill, owner of NativeEarthscapes, with the invaluable help of four fantastic Refuge volunteers—Dub Lyon, Connie and Frank Madia, and Mel Swanson plus the aid



of one awesome backhoe. After several consultations between Diane, and our refuge manager, staff and volunteers, a design was drawn up. The goal was to screen the ugly, but necessary, buildings, trucks, and other equipment, from the visitors who want and deserve to see the natural beauty and wildlife of the Refuge. Plants were also put in around the bird blind. Most of the plants are good wildlife plants, benefiting birds, butterflies, bees, and other native wildlife. Fifty-one plants were put in, mostly trees and shrubs, along with perennial herbaceous plants. All of them are native to some part of the Refuge. Diane is happy to answer any questions the public may have about the project.

Contact her at [nativeearthscapes@gmail.com](mailto:nativeearthscapes@gmail.com) or (512) 259-0270.

Our 6<sup>th</sup> Annual SparrowFest took place February 5<sup>th</sup> and it was a huge success. It was still quite cold Saturday morning, in the mid-20s with a stiff northwesterly wind, but warmed up significantly as the day progressed. Conditions became quite pleasant in the afternoon as temperatures climbed to the high 50s and the wind died down. There was still a bit of snow and ice in shady spots on the ground and on the entry drive to the Flying X Friday night and Saturday morning, but all major roads were in good shape and we had no weather-related road mishaps before, during, or after SparrowFest.



Savannah Sparrow  
Photo Credit: Jeff Whitlock

My birding started with a bang just before sunrise when I relocated one of the two Lark Buntings Bill Reiner had seen the afternoon before at the Flying X. I was able to show the bird to several participants who arrived early. This and the other bird were relocated several times later in the day, and most festival participants were able to get their fill of this irregular winter specialty of our area.

We were “only” able to locate 17 sparrow species during the day, a lower total than any of our previous years (which have ranged from 18 to 20), but SparrowFest participants still appeared to enjoy the opportunity to see LeConte’s and Grasshopper Sparrows (and others) at close range, and the opportunity to study in the classroom and in the field the abundance and diversity of wintering Emberizids that beneficent land management in central Texas can afford. Our sparrow “misses” were the ones that are toughest for us to find regularly on the refuge, including Eastern Towhee (regular but still rare in winter in Central Texas), Canyon Towhee (regular but extremely local and perhaps declining on the eastern Plateau), Harris’ Sparrow (somewhat irregular on the eastern plateau in winter, even though it is reliably present in winter on the blackland prairies to the east of the plateau), and Swamp Sparrow (hard to find in winter on or near the refuge because of the scarcity of appropriate habitat and also perhaps because some of these birds present earlier in the winter move further south in January and February in response to severe winter weather.) Other birds of interest for the day were a couple of Sage Thrashers seen well by participants on Bill Reiner’s morning trip to Simons Tract, and a Merlin spotted at the Flying X after lunch by Jeff Patterson. My birdlist for the day was about 55 species in two counties (Burnet and Travis).

Many thanks to my co-leaders Bill Reiner, Randy Pinkston, and Jeff Patterson for providing skillful and enthusiastic field trip leadership and classroom support. Thanks also to the refuge management who continue to support this “sparrow outreach,” and to the owners of Peaceful Springs Preserve and Cedar Stump Ranch for providing access to their enchanting properties. And thanks to Friends of Balcones volunteers Shelia Hargis, Laurie Foss, Dub Lyon, Sandi Gilchrist, and others for helping in the kitchen and with crowd control. Thanks to John Harrington for spending the day in the kitchen instead of out in the field (where I suspect he would have preferred to be) and to HEB for the cost of our meals. But thanks most of all to Cathy Harrington, without whose organization and enthusiasm SparrowFest could not take place.

Byron Stone

# Join Us!

## Sculpture Stroll

Twenty artists, members of the Texas Society of Sculptors, will display their work beginning April 4<sup>th</sup> through the end of the Balcones Songbird Festival at Flat Creek Estate Vineyard and Winery. A guided Sculpture Stroll through the grounds will take place beginning at 5:30 the night of Wine and Star Shine, so plan on coming out for the art and staying for wine and food pairings. At dark there will be a wonderful opportunity for a look at the stars through the fine telescopes of Jeffrey Phillips. Surely, a night to remember.

*All art on display at the Sculpture Stroll is for sale with a percentage of the proceeds benefitting Friends of Balcones and our quest to complete the refuge.*



Rooster sculpture by Dar Richardson  
Dancing Oaks by Shakti

## Call for educational volunteers!

### Balcones Songbird Festival Family Day Events May 1, 2011

The Festival has 18 activity stations designed to educate kids on nature and birding! We are looking for station volunteers to instruct activities. Visit our website’s **CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS** link for complete details.

### For Sale at the Songbird Festival

This year’s featured item is an 85mm DiaScope with Carl Zeiss lens owned by the late Jim Gilchrist, legal advisor to the Friends Board.

This \$2400 value comes with a deluxe tri-pod, zoom eyepiece, camera adapter and elite carrying case. Available only at Songbird Saturday and Sunday for \$1500.



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Newsletter Editor - Tess Sherman

## Draft Vision Ready for Public Comment

Nearly 100 recommendations to guide the growth and management of the National Wildlife Refuge System for the next decade or so, the *Conserving the Future* draft vision covers the gamut of wildlife conservation issues. It is available at [www.americaswildlife.org/](http://www.americaswildlife.org/) for public comment through Earth Day, April 22.

"The American public too often discounts wildlife conservation threats as being too far away, not relevant to their everyday lives and even temporal," says the draft vision. "The finest minds, the strongest partnerships and the greatest innovation must be brought to the task of increasing society's conservation literacy to fulfill the agency's mission 'for the continuing benefit of the American people.'"

Among its recommendations are:

- To work with tribes and other federal land management agencies to develop a National Conservation Strategy that works across landscapes with private landowners to increase the representation, size and connectivity of protected areas.

- To implement a plan to guide the Refuge System's land conservation work and overhaul the Land Acquisition Prioritization System to help determine the importance of new and existing acquisition projects, including the establishment national wildlife refuges in urban areas.
- To encourage a Friends group for every staffed refuge; there are now about 230 Friends groups.
- To review the Appropriate Use Policy, so a wider variety of nature-based experiences may be possible. The draft notes that jogging, picnicking, sunbathing, bicycling and dog-walking often are considered outside of the wildlife-dependent recreation definition that guides strict interpretation of refuge appropriate use. "Refuge managers have become rightly cautious because they have seen what happens to wildlife resources when participation is too large and incompatible," the draft says.
- To engage youth in an array of work and volunteer programs.
- Within the next 10 years, to more than double the number of minorities and people with disabilities who work for the Refuge System, in part by reaching high school and college youth from diverse communities and exposing them to Service conservation careers.
- To develop an environmental education strategy that not only inventories existing programs but also identifies priorities for investment of staff and funds and outlines basic standards for national wildlife refuges.
- To develop standards for credibility, efficiency and consistent application of science in planning and management.
- Working with state fish and wildlife agencies, to prepare a strategy to double youth participation in hunting and fishing by 2020, paying special attention to individuals of all ages with disabilities.
- To develop a five-year plan to "green" the Refuge System.

## Enjoy The Refuge, Share The Fun

Our Friends Membership Committee is asking our members to help distribute bookmarks to vendors, organizations, etc.

To help, please e-mail: [ruth@friendsofbalcones.org](mailto:ruth@friendsofbalcones.org).

To join, visit: [www.friendsofbalcones.org](http://www.friendsofbalcones.org)



The draft also makes recommendations regarding climate change, law enforcement, fire management, marine ecosystems, invasive species, wilderness stewardship, and conservation science and research.

The draft vision is the work of 70 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees as well as the National Wildlife Refuge Association, a partner in the *Conserving the Future* process. A vision document is scheduled to be presented to the Service Director and top management in late May.