

Celebration of Cranes— An AOK Signature Event

Cindy Jeffrey

In 2018, the AOK board of trustees discussed ways to broaden the organization's outreach, to educate and celebrate who we are and what we do. One of the ideas that rose to the top, was to hold a Celebration of Cranes at Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. Back in 1971, Executive Director of AOK Ron Klataske had organized an event for the National Audubon Society, for which he was then working as a regional director, to draw people to witness the spring staging on the Platte River in Nebraska of nearly half a million migrating Sandhill Cranes. In subsequent years, that event had become one of Nebraska's greatest wildlife tourist attractions.

The Board of AOK realized that we had at hand right here in Kansas an internationally important wetland that provides a necessary stopover for migratory birds, as well as home to many plants and animals associated with wetlands. While all the shorebirds, ducks, geese, songbirds and Sandhill Cranes that stop here are special, the rare and endangered Whooping Cranes that may be spotted here during migration make the Quivira salt marsh an extra special attraction. It is an exciting and wonderful experience to see these representatives of a species that was almost extinct, with numbers as low as 21 in 1941, but that with concerted effort, now numbers over 800.

This first Celebration of the Cranes in 2018 needed to come together quickly as the time of the migration was nearing. It was planned for a time when the Whooping Cranes are statistically most likely to be at Quivira, Saturday, November 3, 2018.

Ron Klataske arranged the vans and guides to be there that Saturday for tours, beginning at 8 am from the Headquarters/Visitor's Center at the refuge. Scopes were set up in appropriate locations with a guide to help visitors spot the cranes. As late as Wednesday before the scheduled event, only about twenty people had signed up. But notices in Hutchinson and Wichita papers resulted in an inundation of calls to Quivira Headquarters. Early on Friday, when Margy Stewart, Mary McCoy and Beth Schultz arrived to get things ready, they were met by 15 people who had heard about the event, and were ready to go see the birds. The first tour took place when they headed up to the Big Salt Marsh, accompanied by this informal group of early arrivals.

On Saturday the tours went on all day until the cranes returned to the marsh at dusk.

"Ron was on his feet pre-dawn picking up the van and then giving tours for 12 hours straight, without rest or food, while genially interacting with droves of people, even after burning his tongue on my hot cider!" said Margy Stewart. Ultimately, probably one hundred fifty people turned up for the van tours and conversations in the headquarters.



After the event, Margy Stewart sent a letter to all the attendees asking for feedback. And we received some wonderful comments:

"...the excitement"

"Whooping Cranes are life birds for us"

"We got out of the car and were totally swept up in the magic of wings and contact calls as flock after flock flew over us, almost low enough to touch. I can feel it still. Unforgettable!"

We also got some good suggestions on how to improve the event. We realized that planning should begin much earlier. At the next board meeting a committee was formed to plan the 2019 Celebration of Cranes, and heed many of these suggestions.

The 2019 Celebration of Cranes had a tour Friday evening, three on Saturday, and one Sunday morning, with a guide and a driver in each van. Spotting scopes were set up ahead of time at the best locations for viewing. We coordinated with the Quivira NWR staff and made sure that all inquiries came to us. Online registration was made available. Margy Stewart contacted and made arrangements for our three excellent speakers. They presented in the morning and the afternoon at the Visitors Center on Saturday: Rex Buchanan talked about the geology and water of the refuge, Elizabeth Smith talked about Whooping Cranes

specifically, and Anne Lacy, Crane Research Coordinator, talked about Sandhill Cranes.

There were activities for children thanks to Lucia Johnson, a display about Bison by George LeRoux, and literature about AOK, the refuge, and maps, etc. were available. Hot cider and refreshments were provided throughout the day. We also added the option of a sack lunch participants could order ahead of time, giving the local town of Stafford some business.

And they came, approximately 85 people who registered to attend. The vans were never idle! People filled the room for the speakers' presentations (given once in the morning and once in the afternoon). The weather even cooperated. 2019 was an even bigger success than the previous year!

We looked forward to 2020. And then 2020 came and threw us all for a loop. What do we do now, do we cancel the event completely? Like so many things in 2020 we decided to go virtual. While not comparable to visiting the refuge in person, seeing this wondrous place with your own eyes and ears, it would at least be an opportunity for education, and perhaps entice people to go on their own. Six distinguished speakers agreed to give presentations via live streaming: "Overview of Quivira National Wildlife Refuge" by Mike Oldham; "Shorebirds and Wetlands" by Robert Penner; "Sandhill Cranes: Living on the Edge of Winter," by David Rintoul; "Whooping Cranes" by Elizabeth Smith; and "Water" with Rex Buchanan and Burke Wade.

No refreshments, no hot cider (unless provided at home), but the migration continues, the Sandhill Cranes, Whooping Cranes, shorebirds, ducks, and warblers still follow the ancient rituals. We must do all we can to sustain these essential wetlands for them. That is the purpose and goal of the Celebration of Cranes.

Photo Captions:

1. Anne Lacy, Crane Research Coordinator with the Whooping Crane Eastern Partnership
2. Elizabeth H. Smith, North America Program Director and Texas Whooping Crane Program Leader, International Crane Foundation
3. Rex Buchanan, Director Emeritus, Kansas Geological Survey
4. George LeRoux, Bison Rancher and Board member of AOK

