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News from the Coastal North Carolina National Wildlife Refuges Complex

Alligator River, Pea Island, Pocosin Lakes,
Roanoke River, Mackay Island, Currituck,
Mattamuskeet, Swanquarter and Cedar Island

Pea Island Refuge Visitor Center Raising Project Complete... But Pandemic Postpones Use

By Steve Brumfield

Lost in the weird world of the COVID-19 pandemic, was a major Pea Island Refuge project. Highly anticipated and nearly forgotten, the Pea Island Visitor Center got a new look. Due to the encroaching Atlantic Ocean, a local refuge friends group, the Coastal Wildlife Refuge Society (CWRS), began a fundraising project to pay for raising Pea Island Refuge Visitor Center by five feet.

This is a perfect example of the important work Friends groups offer national wildlife refuges. Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge had a need to raise the visitor center and asked the CWRS to assist in the fundraising project. Together with dozens of amazing donors from all across the country, enough money was raised to cover the project.

The original idea and the coordination of the overall project was handled by Bonnie Strawser, head of Visitor Services for Pea Island and Alligator River Refuges.

Much of the carpentry and ground work was done by volunteers George and Peggy Harrison and Pea Island Assistant Refuge Manager Art Beyer. They were hands-on for the whole raising project. They built the new entrance ramp, and other needed platforms and stairs. Plus they assisted with the plumbing, wiring and much more.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees, Bobby Govan and Eric Craddock graded the lot and helped with heavy equipment. Donnie Harris was an expert with the chainsaw, topping off the pilings.

Mary Grindlay (gift shop manager), Tracey Rock (volunteer coordinator) and refuge volunteers and interns also spent time doing interior work, including pulling out very old carpeting and replacing it with new flooring.

We look forward to having you here when the visitor center re-opens sometime in 2021.

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New Faces at the Refuges

By Sarah Toner

We are proud to welcome four new members to our refuges teams. Be sure to give them a warm welcome when you see them around!

Ken Andrews

Program Support Specialist

Ken Andrews is the new Program Support Specialist based out of Mattamuskeet NWR. As part of the new complex-wide Business Team, Ken is handling administrative support duties such as processing expenses, organizing permitting, and answering the phones and mail.



Ken comes to us from the Grand Canyon National Park, where he worked in facilities maintenance. A veteran and former police officer, Ken is originally from Pamlico, North Carolina. In his free time, he loves fishing and going to the beach with his daughter.

Ken loves that working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lets him get outside on the job, like joining wildlife biologists on a recent airboat trip. He says he values working with a team of similarly outdoor-minded colleagues: "I've found my groove where everyone thinks the same way as me." Ken is excited to learn new things and work in a great location.

Vanessa Chaney

Fire Budget Analyst

Vanessa Chaney is the new Fire Budget Analyst. Vanessa is not a new face in the Complex—previously, she's worked as a biological technician and a frequent volunteer. Vanessa is using her expertise with the complex to pioneer a new role: keeping track of the fire management budget for all eastern North Carolina refuges.



Vanessa is originally from Mineral County, West Virginia, close to Maryland and Virginia. Her older sister's work with the National Park Service inspired her interest in public lands, motivating her to get a B.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries Resource Management from West Virginia University. She's worked for many federal agencies, including the Forest Service, Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Park Service.

In her free time, Vanessa loves outdoor recreation, especially hunting, fishing, and hiking. She especially enjoys horseback riding, and is hoping to keep horses soon. She's excited to be back with the refuge team. She says, "I've volunteered and worked short-term for the Fish and Wildlife Service, and it's really become home. It's great to return."

Sarah Toner

Wildlife Refuge Specialist



Sarah Toner is the new Wildlife Refuge Specialist, helping support and manage refuges in the complex. Sarah graduated from Cornell University with a B.S. in Biological Sciences and worked for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, where she developed new content for the Merlin Bird ID app.

Sarah has been passionate about birds since she was eight years old, and quickly developed her birding skills to become one of the top young birders in the country. Her interest in understanding

birds and their habitats motivated her to study ornithology, and she's been fortunate to have the opportunity to travel around the world studying birds. Her experiences have given her a deep appreciation for all the intertwined aspects of the natural world.

When she's not out birding (which is rare), Sarah enjoys looking for cool plants and wildlife, backpacking, reading, sewing, and crochet. Sarah is excited to explore and help conserve the diverse natural resources of coastal North Carolina.

Steven Warner

*Visitor Services,
Educational Programs Coordinator*



Steven Warner is the new Visitor Services Specialist and Education Program Coordinator. Steven is preparing and delivering educational and outreach programs for both Alligator River and Pea Island NWR. Previously, he has worked in a variety of education and instruction positions, from instructor for the Coast Guard to Education Specialist at the Nauticus Naval museum in Norfolk, Virginia.

Steven is originally from upstate New York, but he has lived across the U.S. and traveled widely, even as far as Antarctica! He visited Antarctica while aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Star, an ice breaking ship that opens a channel for resupply ships to the Antarctic research station at McMurdo.

Steven enjoys sailing and hiking in his free time. He is looking forward to giving people more experiences with wildlife. Steven says people have "too little exposure to the outdoors, much less any wildlife. When they come to a Refuge I love to show them the variety of animals that live there."

Refuge Road Maintenance Project Updates

Kelley Van Druten

In early March, maintenance staff noticed the road shoulder on Laurel Bay Road between River and Pump Roads was starting to give way. In August, the refuge had a local contractor



Top: road shoulder starting to give way, and above: after bulkhead was installed, credit Christopher Amenta, Federal Highway Administration.

construct a bulkhead made with vinyl sheet piling along 100' and 40' stretches of road that were in jeopardy. Refuge staff filled dirt in behind the bulkhead and placed rocks to stabilize the ends.

Other projects of note accomplished by maintenance staff and fire crew equipment operators include replacing the water control structure in the South Twiford F impoundment, which is the impoundment closest to Buffalo City on the south side of Twiford Road and clearing Whipping Creek Road. Maintenance staff are also currently working on clearing Chip Road down to the intersection with Nichols Road.

Beginning in March 2016, it has been quite a process of scoping, design, permitting, funding delays, and finally construction to raise the profile of Milltail Road on approximately 0.64 miles of roadway and make repairs to Milltail Bridge. The entire project was funded by the Federal Highways Administration and managed by their Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division.

The project was awarded to GC Works, Inc. from Miami, Florida in November 2019. Construction finally began June 15, 2020 and is nearly complete. A narrower but drier road should reopen by September 11.

Lightning Plays Havoc With Refuge Phone System

By Steve Brumfield

In July, lightning hit near National Wildlife Refuges Visitor Center on Roanoke Island, which also is the administrative headquarters for the Coastal North Carolina Refuges Complex. The lightning strike destroyed portions of the telephone system.

The impacted portion of the phone system controlled the electronic answering messages and recording capabilities on the main operations system as well as every employee's office phone. You can still call 252-473-1131 or 1132, but there is no longer any automated message. There is also no way a caller can dial an extension to reach an employee.

To fill the gap of the system, the phone is answered 9 am - 4 pm, Monday through Friday by our wonderful volunteers. These "operators" answer the phone and can transfer the caller to an employee's extension or take a message and pass them on to employees.

Adding insult to injury, since March, many refuge employees have been assigned to telework at home. That means that sometimes message response might take a little longer.

We are sorry about the phone system problems. Added to general pandemic conditions we ask that you bear with us and know that we are trying to keep things running as smoothly as possible.

Wings

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E-mail: alligatorriver@fws.gov
http://www.fws.gov/refuge/alligator_river/

Follow us on Facebook:
Friends of Alligator River and Pea Island National Wildlife Refuges and USFWS North Carolina



Protect Waterbird Nesting Habitat, How Can You Help?

By Becky Harrison

The species of waterbirds we monitor face several survival challenges. Predation and disturbance can significantly impact nesting success. There are several ways you can help minimize the effects of human activities on these nesting birds.



Adult least tern with nest at Pea Island NWR, credit Becky Harrison/USFWS.

First, follow all Refuge rules and regulations. Do not trespass through closed protected areas and give the animals space they need. We try to close only what the birds need on the beach, so please respect the posted areas which allow a buffer from human activities.

Please look out for eggs and chicks. As chicks become mobile, they will leave the closures to learn how to forage in the swash zone near the water.

Keep all dogs on leashes and away from closed areas. Dogs may chase and harass birds, as well as trample nests, killing chicks or crushing eggs.

Leave no trace—be sure to take trash off the beach when you leave. Food (including bait and scraps from fishing) can attract predators like gulls, raccoons, and coyotes.

Dispose of fishing line properly as it can entangle and injury a variety of wildlife.

We appreciate your help in sharing the shore with the wildlife!

It's Sea Turtle Nesting Season on Pea Island NWR!

By Becky Harrison

Five of species of sea turtles occur in North Carolina waters: loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), green (*Chelonia mydas*), leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), and hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). The most abundant species in North Carolina is the loggerhead that nests annually on Pea Island beaches.

Green turtles are less frequent but regular nesters in North Carolina. All species of marine turtles that occur in North Carolina are protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Loggerhead and green sea turtles are listed as threatened and the other three species are all listed as endangered under both federal and state law.

Due to safety issues associated with group activities and coronavirus, we modified monitoring efforts and volunteer protocols from normal operations. Turtle Patrol volunteers were able to continue to monitor the beaches daily to look for nesting activities since one person performs those actions at a time. However, we were not able to have our Turtle Watch volunteer program check nests this year. Thank you to everyone for their continued patience and dedication to these efforts!

As of August 24, we have documented 41 turtle nesting activities on the refuge including 20 false crawls, 5 green nests, and 16 loggerhead nests. Please



Juvenile loggerheads race towards the ocean, credit USFWS.

report any sightings of sea turtles or nesting activities on Pea Island to the Supervisory Refuge Biologist, Becky Harrison, at 252-423-1839. If you're lucky enough to see a live turtle on the beach, please try to take some photos.

Annual Wings Over Water Wildlife Festival 2020... Postponed

Steve Brumfield

One of the words for 2020 has been, ‘postponed.’ And the Wings Over Water (WOW) Wildlife Festival was affected by postponement. What was postponed in 2020 and missed, is the annual gathering of friends, birders, naturalists, nature lovers and paddlers from all over the country. These are people who love being a part of Wings Over Water, both as program leaders and as participants who have had it be a part of it their fall season for a great number of the festival’s 22 years.

The usual great line up of birding, paddling, natural history, photography and art programs for both the October and December (Encore) sessions are

postponed. The keynote speaker, Colleen Olfenbuttel, the Black Bear and furbearer biologist for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, was ready to lead trips and give a fascinating talk at the keynote dinner.

The annual keynote dinner was to be at a wonderful new restaurant location in Manteo, the Avenue Waterfront Grille. The Avenue Waterfront Grille has excellent food and a gorgeous view of Shallowbag Bay. The dinner was also postponed.

Postponed, while not always a happy word, is a word of hope. So let's look forward to next year's Wings Over Water festival which will be held October 19-24 and WOW Encore December 10-12 of 2021.

Where Is Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge?

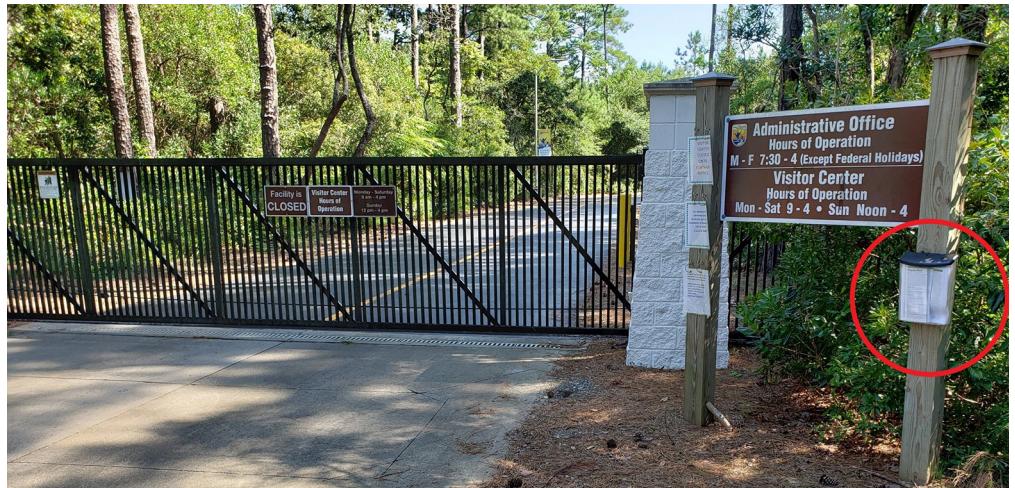
Steve Brumfield

Many visitors have trouble finding the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. It is on the mainland, not Roanoke Island. The visitor center for Alligator River is located on Roanoke Island and not on the mainland. And therein lies the rub.

There is no street address for Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. It is basically out in the wild, not a part of a town or city. The refuge is over 160,000 acres, covering a wide, non-uniform area. The main portion of the refuge is located about six miles west of Roanoke Island off of Highway 64.

Most visitors access the refuge from either Buffalo City or Milltail Roads. If you're on 64 coming from the west, the refuge begins as soon as you exit the Alligator River Bridge heading east. Buffalo City Road is about three miles on your right. Milltail Road is about six miles on the right. If you trying to reach Alligator River Refuge from Roanoke Island, you head west on Highway 64. Once you cross one of the two bridges that take you west off of Roanoke Island and you reach a flashing traffic light, you still have about 5.5 miles until you reach Milltail Road. And there you'll make a left and you're on the refuge.

Confusion about how to reach Alligator Refuge sometimes occurs when someone looks on-line and sees Alligator River Refuge listed as 100 Conservation Way, Manteo, NC 27954. That address is not the actual refuge. Instead, 100 Conservation Way on Roanoke Island is the location of National Wildlife Refuges Visitor Center and the administrative headquarters for Coastal North Carolina Refuges Complex. The visitor center is an interpretative center not only for Alligator River, but also for Pea Island and several other refuges found in the northeast region of North Carolina.



Above: Visitor Center entrance ramp map and information box location, right: Visitor Center main gate map and information box location, both credit USFWS.

To help lost visitors find their way from National Wildlife Refuges Visitor Center to the actual refuge, we have added outdoor map holder boxes in which we put maps with a refuge directions at the entrance gate.

And on a post next to the visitor center entrance ramp, right along the parking lot pavement/sidewalk as you pull up in front of the visitor center.

For refuge information, you may also call 252-473-1131, 9 am to 4 pm or 252-216-9464, 7 am - 3 pm Monday-Friday.

Currently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the inside portion of the visitor center is temporarily closed.

Mattamuskeet Water Restoration Project

By Wendy Stanton

Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge has been awarded two grants to remove invasive common carp from Lake Mattamuskeet. An estimated 4.4 million pounds of invasive carp are present in the lake. The first award is the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Coastal Program Funds and the second grant is the USFWS Large Invasive Species Grant. To remove the carp, an integrated pest management approach will be used. This approach will include netting near baited areas, carp exclusion fences and other barriers to herd the carp into traps. The removal of carp from impaired systems is commonly utilized as a management tool and has repeatedly been associated with increased water clarity, reduced nutrient concentrations, and reestablishment of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV).



Asian carp, credit April Lamb.

As part of the Lake Mattamuskeet Watershed Restoration Plan, restoration of SAV was chosen as the primary indicator for a healthy lake ecosystem. The carp removal project in conjunction with a reduction in the excessive nutrients and total suspended solids in the lake will improve water quality and clarity and ensure the successful restoration of submerged aquatic vegetation.

Habitat Restoration Project at Pea Island NWR

By Becky Harrison

Spring and summer were busy water bird seasons at Pea Island! Refuge staff and interns worked to actively survey species including piping plovers, American oystercatchers, least terns, and black skimmers with modified protocols due to social distancing recommendations.

As nesting pairs began using the variety of habitats at Pea Island, staff temporarily closed off different sections of the refuge to reduce disturbance and to protect nesting birds. We adaptively manage these areas to respond to different nesting activities, so these areas

How I Spent My Pandemic Vacation or How COVID-19 Affected the Summer (and Beyond)

By Steve Brumfield

It's not news that the whole world is under a viral attack. The Coastal North Carolina National Wildlife Refuges Complex, which includes Alligator River, Pea Island, Pocosin Lakes, Mackay Island, Roanoke River and Mattamuskeet Refuges, is affected just like everywhere else.

Thousands of visitors throughout the year and especially summer, visit these regional national wildlife refuges. Normally the visitor centers and gift shops are very busy. But this summer and continuing for an undetermined time, the Refuge visitor centers are closed.



Intertidal pools, credit NCDOT

may change regularly. As of late August, we have three closures on the beach for nesting activities—one near Oregon Inlet and two across from North Pond.

In February, we completed a large habitat restoration effort just south of Oregon Inlet. We worked with partners at the NC Department of Transportation and Barnhill Construction to excavate approximately three acres of sand to create five open water intertidal pool areas.

These habitats are important foraging, breeding, and nesting areas for many shorebirds including the piping plover, American oystercatcher, and terns. The 'ponds' were ~80' long and 5' deep. The excavated sand was deposited just south of the ponds.

We observed a terrific response from the birds to these new habitats. Throughout the spring, we saw multiple shorebird species foraging and nesting near the ponds and a large colony of least terns nested on the shelly substrate of the deposition shelf.

Visitors who have been used to stopping into refuge visitor centers to get the latest wildlife sighting news, pick up maps and brochures, look at the exhibits and just in general orient themselves to the wildlife refuge, missed those many services. But, much of what someone may want to know about the refuges is available on-line, more map and information holders have been installed (see *Where is Alligator River* on page 5), and you can reach information by calling 252-473-1131, Monday through Friday 9 am – 4 pm.

Hundreds of visitors each year make it a part of their summer vacation to participate in one or more of the refuges' guided interpretive programs. But this year, the interpretive programs were postponed until sometime in 2021. On Alligator River Refuge, all van, tram, canoe and other guided interpretive tours were and are postponed. At Pea Island Refuge, the year 'round and extra summer bird walks were postponed until 2021. These popular programs normally give visitors an opportunity to learn about and see the refuge in ways beyond just exploring on their own.

But even if the indoor visitor centers and the outdoor group programs were not available to those on their summer vacation this year, the actual refuges, the wildlands with wildlife, stayed open, and remain open.

Everyone is welcome to visit the regional national wildlife refuges every day during daylight hours. Hunting, fishing, photography and observation opportunities are still possible on the refuges.

Check each of the refuge websites for hunting and fishing rules and regulations.

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/alligator_river/

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/pea_island/

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/pocosin_lakes/

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/mackay_island/

<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/mattamuskeet/>

Donations Needed for Purple Martin Housing Project

By Karen Lebing and Steve Brumfield

Hello to all bird lovers! For the last 20 years, a large and healthy colony of Purple Martins have been returning from the Amazon to a set of houses built by Neal Moore near the maintenance buildings at the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (ARNWR).

Unfortunately, during Hurricane Dorian in 2019, those houses were destroyed by strong winds. But thanks to generous donations of older, unused houses by the NC Purple Martin Society and the Manns Harbor Purple Martin Society, we were able to install temporary housing for the colony for 2020. Now we need to plan for 2021 (a better year ahead for all of us, I hope!).

We propose to install new T-14 Purple Martin houses just outside the fence at the ARNWR maintenance facility. But we need donations to purchase the new housing. The new houses are made with a polywood T-14 system that includes the house, a 3" aluminum T-14 pole, and mounting kit. It has 14 large compartments, is made of 100% recycled plastic, comes in white, is built to withstand the weather and is extremely durable. To see the T-14 with specs, go to <https://www.purplemartin.org/shop/product/pwt14s/polywood-t-14-system/>. (See photo.)

The cost from the Purple Martin Conservation Association (a non-profit organization established in 1987 for the research, education, and conservation of purple martins) for one of these setups is \$1,107.50 for members. If we can afford to put up at least 2 houses to accommodate the large ARNWR colony, the cost would be \$2,215. We would also want to purchase pole guards to eliminate snake and raccoon tampering (about \$100 each). This would be a long-term, low-maintenance approach.

If you would like to donate to the Purple Martin Alligator River Refuge house fund and you want to have the option to use a credit card, you can go to this Coastal Wildlife Refuge Society link:



<https://www.coastalwildliferefuge.com/donate.html>

In a description box on the credit card payment form, write, 'Purple Martin.' You may call Steve Brumfield of the USFWS at 252-216-9464, to give him your information. Or, if you would rather pay by check, you may mail a check or money order to:

CWRS, P.O. Box 1808, Manteo, NC 27954, and designate, 'Purple Martin.'

Over 20 years ago, volunteer and birding enthusiast, Neal Moore, built two attractive, functional and sturdy Purple Martin houses. In his garage shop in Buxton, North Carolina, Neal made sure the houses had the correct size entrances and that they would hold multiple Purple Martin families. And evidently he made them pretty well. They housed many Purple Martin families until 2019, when Hurricane Dorian hit the Outer Banks. Over 20 years after construction, the bird houses that Neal built finally blew down and were damaged beyond repair.

Bird walk volunteer leader, Wings Over Water leader, and a fine nature photographer, Karen Lebing and her husband Gerry, offered to take on the project of researching the best Purple Martin housing to replace the destroyed houses. And they have offered to clean and maintain the houses.

SHOP

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL Wildlife Refuge



Patches



Magnets



Puzzles



Postcards



Decals



Hats & T-shirts





The retail store is closed. If you would like to purchase refuge souvenirs call (252) 473-1131 or visit coastalwildliferefuge.com