

Southeast Idaho NWR Complex *Newsletter*

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Expanded focus for the *Newsletter!* Our *Newsletter* initially and for the last four years has centered on Camas NWR near Hamer, Idaho. PVAS “adopted” this refuge in 2004 and has contributed to projects and goals for Camas, including quarterly newsletters. The Southeast Idaho NWR Complex, based in Chubbuck, includes Camas NWR, Minidoka NWR in Rupert, Grays Lake NWR north of Soda Springs, Bear Lake NWR south of Montpelier, and Oxford Slough Waterfowl Reproduction Area near Oxford. Due to retirements and transfers, all four refuge manager positions and the Complex leadership positions were in transition during the last three years. We used the 2009 *Newsletter* as a vehicle to introduce each of the new managers and the Complex Leader, Tracy Casselman. The next issue will introduce John Braastad, the new Deputy Leader, which completes the roster of new staff for the Complex. That introduction process also focused on all four refuges, and PVAS discovered much public interest in news of the entire Complex. As a result, we will in future issues cover the activity and goals for all of these Refuge areas in the *Newsletter*. Each of these resources is within easy driving distance of Pocatello, Blackfoot and Idaho Falls and offers an incredible variety of habitat and wildlife, scenic beauty and of primary importance, protection, nutrition and nesting habitat for migratory waterfowl and land birds as well as a large variety of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and native plants. The four sites differ in topography and ecosystems, and are priceless resources to the people of southeast Idaho as well as the wildlife they protect.

A look at Bear Lake NWR. Since Bear Lake NWR (<http://www.fws.gov/bearlake>) received the least attention in previous issues, we want to reintroduce Annette deKnijf who assumed the position of Refuge Manager in October of 2007. Annette grew up in Southern California and came to us from The Washington Maritime Refuge Complex on the Olympic Peninsula. She had responsibility for multiple



Refuge Manager Annette deKnijf overlooking one of the water control devices at Bear Lake NWR on April 2, 2010; everything's frozen!

islands in the Pacific off the coast of Washington, islands closed to public access and protected for endangered and at risk seabirds and marine mammals. While she loved this mission and her work there, she also hoped to expand her experience working with the public and communities in different ecosystems. She now has responsibility for an 18,000 acre refuge “comprised mainly of a bulrush marsh, open water, and flooded meadows of sedges, rushes and grasses. Portions of the refuge include scattered grasslands and brush covered mountain slopes. Bear Lake Refuge encompasses what is locally referred to as Dingle Swamp or Dingle Marsh. Along with Bear Lake proper, the marsh was once part of a larger prehistoric lake that filled the valley. As it drained and receded, Dingle Marsh was reduced from 25,000 acres to less than 17,000 before it became part of the Refuge.”

Bear Lake NWR is a crucial waterfowl production and migratory refueling area for the intermountain flyway; in a typical breeding season, the refuge will produce 4,500 ducks and 1,800 geese. A few trumpeter swans are nesting on the refuge and it's a prime site for colonial nesting birds such as the white-faced ibis, snowy egret, black-crowned night-heron, great blue heron, double-crested cormorant, California gull, Caspian tern, Forster's tern, black tern, western grebe, Clark's grebe, and eared grebe.

Like Camas and Grays Lake, Bear Lake lies in a valley surrounded by beautiful mountains, and the habitat supports numerous other species of wildlife which include raptors and many species of songbirds, mule deer, red foxes, moose, and smaller mammals such as muskrats, skunks, and both jack and cottontail rabbits, and less frequently beaver, coyotes, badgers, mink and long-tailed weasels.

The Refuge is surrounded by private land in cattle or crop production. Annette very much values the opportunity to work with not only visitors to the refuge, but the community of farmers, ranchers, public



schools and organizations who value and use the Refuge. She hopes to encourage the use of the refuge for public school and university education and research, and to involve area youth in learning and recreational activities as well.

Several issues she manages on the refuge include the presence of carp, which were introduced to the Bear River decades ago as a possible human food source but never became popular. The large bottom feeding fish now contribute to poor water quality and compete with native fish species for food and habitat. Silt from the Bear River also degrades water quality on the Refuge. Diked units have been constructed to stabilize water levels for waterfowl nesting and exclude silt and carp where possible. Control of noxious invasive weeds and fire management efforts to reduce combustible material to deter wildfires are other important tasks. The FWS publishes a comprehensive brochure about the Refuge, including historical interests and the Thomas Fork Unit along the Bear River near Border, Wyoming. This and other guide materials are available at the Refuge Headquarters at 370 Webster, Box 9, Montpelier, ID 83254, telephone 208-847-1757. Again, we welcome Annette deKnijf; her contagious enthusiasm and valuable skills are another great addition to the Complex.

To left, one of the carp excluders in use to prevent this introduced specie from entering Refuge waters where they compete with cut-throat trout for food and habitat as well as degrade the water quality.

Comprehensive Conservation Planning is a requirement of the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. The act requires an assessment of activities on each Refuge in the United States with a view to developing a fifteen year management plan (CCP). A full explanation of this process, the time tables, goals, and plan for public input is available at Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process, Fish and Wildlife Service, <http://www.fws.gov/policy/602fw3.html> for those who would like a detailed account of the process. Bill Smith, Manager of Grays Lake NWR, has been designated lead Planner for the SEID NWR Complex to work with the other refuge managers in development of our CCPs. Bill's synopsis of the CCP purpose and process is succinct and considerably easier for most of us to understand than the above cited document:

All four refuges in the Southeast Idaho Refuge Complex are initiating a planning process to develop a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) that will guide how the refuge is managed over the next 15 years. We began the planning process for Camas and Bear Lake this winter and plan to have draft documents completed by the end of the year. Then we will initiate planning efforts for Minidoka and Grays Lake.

As we work through the two year CCP process, we have the opportunity to look at a Refuge's management from fresh perspectives. The purpose of each Refuge will remain the same as when it was established—primarily to provide habitat for waterfowl and other migratory birds. Through the planning process, however, we will all review our management of all habitats such as wetlands, meadows, uplands, agricultural lands, and riparian areas, and we will review each of our public use programs, including wildlife observation and photography, hunting, environmental education and interpretation. Public insights and observations are needed to provide us with a more complete and thoughtful process. We will distribute several planning updates to keep the public informed and invite their participation.

As part of the CCP process, a range of possible alternative management approaches will be explored and evaluated, including current management practices. The effects of the various alternatives on the biological resources and local communities will be assessed in an Environmental Assessment (EA) that is prepared concurrently with the CCP, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The planning team has identified some potential issues to be considered and we will be soliciting public input. We encourage everyone to provide us with written comments on these issues and other concerns, and to meet with us at our public open houses and share your ideas by attending public meetings this summer and fall to discuss the issues, challenges, and opportunities at Bear Lake, Camas, Minidoka and Grays Lake NWR.”

Minidoka NWR (<http://www.fws.gov/minidoka/>) near Rupert, and Manager Jeffrey Krueger, are anticipating major changes to the dam on the Snake River which creates Lake Walcott and therefore is crucial to the preservation of the Refuge open water, riparian and estuary areas. Minidoka is essential to over 100,000 molting geese and ducks in late summer and early autumn, prior to migrations, and to refueling migrant waterfowl and landbirds which stop to rest and feed at Minidoka before continuing journeys, some as far as Peru and Argentina. Minidoka is unique among our refuges for several endangered species as well as desert habitat, and offers a different spectrum of plants and animals. The basalt lava flows provide habitat for some of the more diverse reptile faunas in Idaho. Jeff Krueger provided this information about the reconstruction of Minidoka Dam:

“In 1904 Bureau of Reclamation began its first Reclamation Service project in the state of Idaho. The project was virtually completed in 1906 and is referred to today simply as the Minidoka Dam. Minidoka Dam is located approximately 15 miles northeast of the city of Rupert, and serves as an irrigation and hydroelectric supplier for thousands of acres in Minidoka and Cassia counties.

“Minidoka Dam is an 86 foot high earth fill dam nearly one mile in length. The dam holds back water on the Snake River, creating a reservoir, Lake Walcott. For over 100 years now the dam has functioned much the same as it did when it was first constructed. Despite upgrades and modernizing of the hydroelectric portions of the dam, water that is not diverted down the north and south canals for irrigation, or used to produce electricity, is held back in the same manner as when originally constructed. The original concrete and stop log design of the dam's gate system is still used today. Boards were removed or installed to regulate water levels within the reservoir, exactly as they have since 1906.

“Despite standing the test of time, the concrete and stop log structures of the dam have deteriorated. In 2009 the Bureau of Reclamation received notice that funding would become available to replace the stop log system of manipulating water levels within the reservoir. This new system will also allow the reservoir to

be maintained at full pool during winter months, without the fear of ice damage as is the case with the old system.

“Bureau of Reclamation officials worked closely with state and federal agencies including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Fish and Game, and the Idaho State Parks and Recreation Department to address concerns and answer questions regarding proposed renovations. An Environmental Impact Statement was developed by the Bureau addressing all concerns regarding construction, issues of public access and possible habitat loss due to construction. Renovations and upgrades to the Minidoka Dam structures should result in a more efficient system that will easily last another 100 years and continue to provide residents with the irrigation water and hydroelectric power they need, as well as the treasures of the State Park and Minidoka National Wildlife Refuge.”

Camas NWR (<http://www.fws.gov.camas/>) and Manager Brian Wehausen and staff celebrated Dubois Grouse Days and International Migratory Bird Day as well as a spectacular spring on Camas this year. Although concerns about a falling water table and less than ideal snowpack in the Camas Creek drainage system persist, Brian was able to flood ample impoundments to accommodate migrating waterfowl which included hundreds of Canada geese, the first to arrive followed by trumpeter and tundra swans, and some 15,000 snow geese the third week in March. During the end of this period Camas experienced a relatively minor outbreak of avian cholera, which is a bacteria that can kill birds within 24 to 48 hours after exposure. Members of the Complex spent hours searching for and removing carcass of birds to limit exposure to other birds in the area. They removed a total of 55 snow geese, one Canada goose, and 4 ducks suspected of having avian cholera. Remaining and migrating birds on the refuge now appear vital and strong, none of the recent arrivals, including sandhill cranes, shorebirds or the songbirds appear to be affected.

Other important and welcome spring arrivals are **new resident volunteers, William Beaver and wife, Jackie Magill**, shown below on the air boat they had just painted, who plan to be on the refuge until June 1st. Their home is in Austin, Texas, and both retired from specialties with the Texas Department of Transportation. Jackie also has a history as a National Park Ranger in California and both have long experience in environmental education and in two other specialties of enormous value to the refuge system; “Beav” is an expert in concrete construction and Jackie as well in grant writing and public safety for the TDOT. Prior to joining us at Camas, they volunteered at Gavin’s Point National Fish Hatchery in South Dakota, where

“Beav” worked *in* the fish tanks to assist with the spawning process with hands-on tasks, among other responsibilities. Since their arrival at Camas, they’ve enthusiastically joined in all of the refuge maintenance and event planning tasks. Our long time valued resident volunteers John and Sharon Dollar have enjoyed the company and Brian has been delighted with their pitch-in attitudes. They have helped accomplish many projects before they move on to another opportunity. “Beav” and Jackie have loved and enjoyed “this magnificent refuge” and we are so grateful for their contributions and certainly would welcome them back any time.

The resident volunteer program of the NWR System has been a huge assist to Camas NWR; it’s almost impossible to put a dollar value on the efforts and products of John and Sharon Dollar and “Beav, Jackie and others who have served the Refuge so well.



Sage Grouse Habitat Restoration is proceeding on schedule at Camas. Last October the area was seeded with native grasses and forbs. Brain and the Dollars collected seed in the fall from the necessary native sage, which is now being grown in a nursery, and anticipate having 2 to 3 thousand seedlings to plant in the restoration area in the late fall or early winter. Camas has always participated in the Dubois Grouse Days celebration in April. The tour busses from Dubois visit the leks and then Camas NWR, and this year the Sage Grouse Restoration area on the Refuge was dedicated in honor of Kent Christopher, who initiated the whole Grouse Days celebration of Sage Grouse in Dubois. That event has become a nationally known and outstandingly attended event, in which Camas hopes to remain a very significant resource.



Above, a group of students from BYU Idaho (Rexburg) biology classes enjoy some quality birding on International Migratory Bird Day at Camas NWR while this very young Boy Scout examines one of Jim Porter's rescued owls.

International Migratory Bird Day was observed on May 15th on the Refuge. The weather and wildlife couldn't have been more beautiful for between 150 and 175 people, including many families, Boy Scouts, Audubon groups and others, who attended. Snake River Audubon Society presented a table of educational and other materials of interest to everyone and conducted bird tours on the refuge. Portneuf Valley Audubon Society also conducted tours on the observation route and visited with guests about wildlife and habitats on the refuge. Rob Cavallaro, a non-game biologist with Idaho Fish and Game was present and also talked with guests and shared his knowledge of the habitats and creatures on the Refuge. A private owl rehabilitator, Jim Porter, was present with several fledgling owls which were a huge hit with everyone, especially the children. His great horned owl chicks were friendly and touchable for the kids, and his comments about his work, and release efforts when possible, were fascinating to all. Theresa Mathis, a biologist with the Bureau of Land Management, brought a poster board display and also visited with guests and engaged the children especially. Bud Alford represented the Forest Service, Palisades Ranger District, and brought educational materials for

display, including a table of resources presented by volunteers from the Teton Book Store. They also were very interactive with guests, especially Boy Scouts and owls! We thank all participants in this especially productive event for their presence, and felt this was a particularly nice opportunity not only for the adult birders and enthusiasts, but for large groups of children who clearly enjoyed the Refuge and the day.

Organizational meeting for a potential Friends of the Refuge Group! Following activities, a group of 12 people interested in the formation of an active Friends group met with Tracy Casselman, Complex Leader, and Brian Wehausen, Camas Refuge Manager, to discuss the Friends program and sources of information about the purpose and organization of the group. Several other folks had expressed an interest in the effort but had conflicting obligations so we have scheduled a second meeting which will be held at 11 am on June 5th. We will meet at CNW Refuge headquarters to begin discussion of what goals and activities the new group might choose to pursue as well as possible leadership roles. Come early and enjoy the refuge for some great birding and stay for the meeting!!!!!!

Friends Groups were initially proposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service, and now are a very dynamic entity with ties to the National Wildlife Refuge Association (<http://www.refugeassociation.org.html>) which includes many private organizations and their subsidiary, the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement (<http://www.fundrefuges.org/CARE/carehome.html>) These organizations are not affiliated with any government agency and are bi-partisan public efforts to influence policy and funding to protect and enhance our National Wildlife Refuge System. They are involved in working with the Congressional Wildlife Refuge Caucus, and with a multitude of individual projects and goals for very diverse and unique Refuges all across the US. Bear River NWR near Brigham, Utah has an outstanding Friends group and a new visitor's center with audio-visual educational equipment, classrooms, and gorgeous displays, tour guides, and programs for youngsters planned and provided by the Friends Group. Other groups choose entirely different projects and agendas to enhance their chosen Refuge. We will be excited to see what this new group elects to pursue for Camas NWR, and ultimately to encourage the formation of Friends groups for the other three refuges in our Complex.

Camas officially began to divert water from Camas Creek on April 19th and will continue to do so until after the runoff ceases. Come and enjoy the refuge as the wetlands fill with life!

Grays Lake NWR (<http://www.fws.gov.grayslake/>) and Manager Bill Smith have experienced a very dry winter with below average snowfall on the refuge. Surrounding mountains received 40-50% of the normal snow pack. Grays Lake basin was snow free by mid April. May is usually a very wet month, but to date very little spring rain has arrived on the refuge, and water levels are very low throughout the basin. The Bureau of Indian Affairs withdraws water from Grays Lake to store in the Blackfoot reservoir for the Fort Hall Irrigation Project if the marsh level at Grays Lake is above 6387.4 feet, but it's almost one foot lower than that now.

Grays Lake supports the largest nesting sandhill crane population in North America with over 250 breeding pairs and a summer population of 600-700 total. Crane arrivals and courtship rituals were noted in early April as usual but few nest attempts were seen in late April or early May, so this year's cold and inclement spring weather has probably delayed nesting for many species. Prior scientific research at Grays Lake indicates low water years such as this unfortunately lead to decreased nest attempts, reduced nests success, and low production in many species on the refuge, including cranes. Ground foraging predators such as skunks and coyotes, have easy access to shallow nesting species under these conditions. Both ibis and Franklin's gulls have been foraging in the meadows, but staff have not seen active use of the mid-marsh nesting colony location at this time. Only a few species and low numbers of wading shorebirds, curlew, avocet, and willet, have been recorded this year. Phalaropes and stilts are notably absent, and may not have pushed this far north yet due to the late spring. Both elk and deer have returned from winter ranges and have been seen back around the marsh edges and surrounding mountain foothills. Vole and gray squirrel activity appears much higher than normal and we may see a microtine explosion again at Grays Lake, similar to that in 2000. Winnowing snipe and the din of singing chorus frogs have become very common in the early morning and late evening hours in the last week.

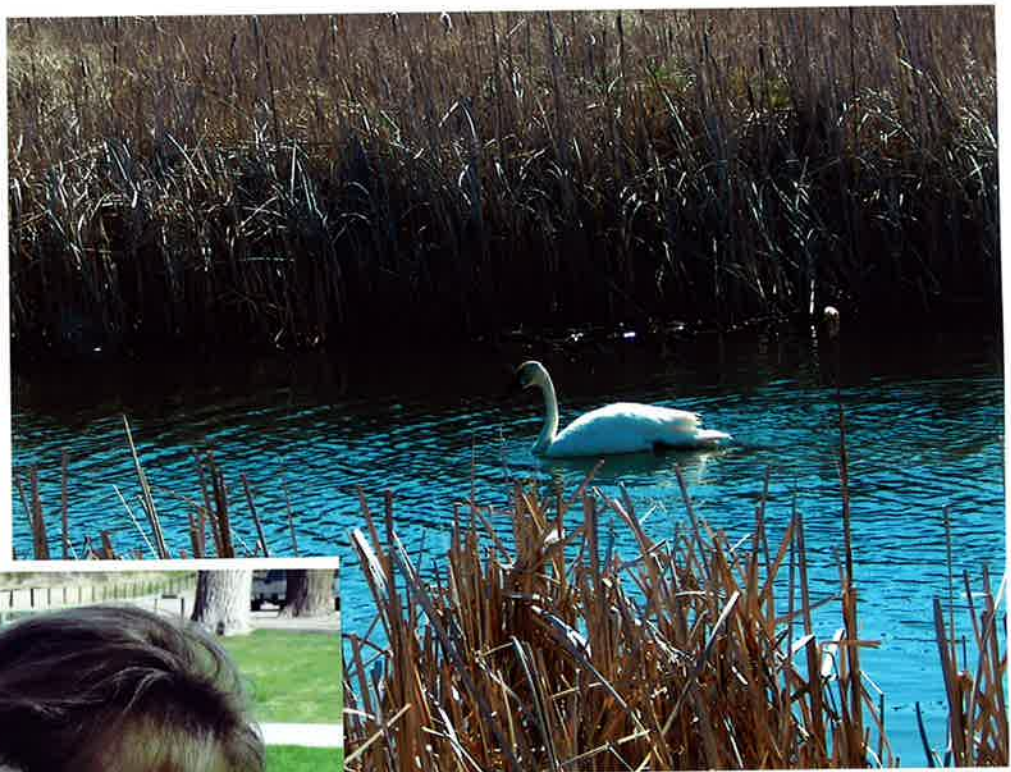
In early May, Carl Mitchell, Grays Lake NWR biologist, hosted instructor Dave Strickland and 12 wildlife students from BYU-Rigby. Talks and discussions were given on refuge biology and management and the students participated in nest searching and monitoring activities on the refuge. We appreciate the opportunity to spend time with these quality students and Dr. Strickland.

The refuge received funding for 2010 to hire one student to assist in biological monitoring and inventory work for the year. The student will assist Refuge staff in conducting wildlife population monitoring, habitat condition inventories and water measurement and modeling.

Manager Bill Smith will be detailed over to a position as the lead Planner for the SEINWR complex to work with the other refuge managers in the development of the Comprehensive Conservation Plans for the Complex. An assistant manager will then be hired to temporarily assist Bill in the development and administration of the operating programs and other activities at Grays Lake NWR while he is working on the CCPs.

Our Southeast Idaho Refuge Complex is such a treasure to the people of Idaho as well as the habitats and wild animals and plants the refuges are designed to protect and enhance. Visit your Refuges, and express your concerns and appreciation to your very dedicated and interesting Refuge Managers. Everyone in the system welcomes you!

Your comments and questions about the Newsletter are always welcome. Please contact Nancy Maxwell at nhtm.live.com or 208-523-4344.



Above, a trumpeter swan close to the viewing route on May 15th at Camas NWR, and left, Volunteer Jackie Magill with another of Jim Porter's rehabilitated fledgling great horned owls he hopes to be able to release eventually in its natural habitat. Numerous people observed both adult and fledgling great horned owls and one or more short eared owl out on the refuge during the International Migratory Bird Day event.



Gray's Lake, Bear Lake and Camas National Wildlife Refuges are all surrounded by beautiful mountain ranges. Above is a view to the west from Camas toward the Lemhi and Lost River Ranges. If you look east, you can see the Tetons as well as part of the northern Rocky Mountain Range. To the north are the Centennials, following the continental divide, and Beaverhead Mt. Ranges. On a very clear day, one can observe mountains in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho from this refuge!

To the right is a view of the fish ladder at Bear Lake, which is designed to allow native game fish access to the refuge, including cutthroat and rainbow trout.

