



THE BOOMER



Quarterly Newsletter of the Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge

Volume 3 issue 3



Message From The President

The Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge held an annual membership meeting on September 13, 2014 at the refuge headquarters near Eagle Lake, Texas. The primary order of business was the election of additional board members. Please join with me to welcome them aboard. I look forward to their help and input as we grow our organization and continue to build on our successes. These new board members provide additional abilities and talents that are sorely needed. Their individual and combined potential is truly exciting and bodes well for the future of the Friends organization, the refuge and the prairie chicken. The board now consists

of twelve dedicated members. Our newest members include:

Carol Davis is a business owner and rancher in Austin County and a resident of Cat Spring. Her family has ranching roots that go back to 1875. Carol has been an essential supported of the APC Festival's Student Art Contest from its beginning.

Cynthia Lurix is the vice president of the Lurix Corporation and resides in Sealy, where she breeds and trains Irish Draught horses. Cynthia is also an author of books, plays and magazine articles. An interesting note: Cynthia's great uncle, Ira Noel Gabrielson, was the first director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Brian McBride is the Chief Financial Officer at Rice Medical Center in Eagle Lake, where he resides. Educated in Utah, Brian has an extensive background in accounting and management. He is heavily involved in community service and is especially interested in involving local youth.

Paul Lurix is the president of the Lurix Corporation and resides in Sealy. Paul is the computer system architect and developer of numerous software systems for a myriad of applications. Paul is an avid birder and conservationist. Involved in local issues.

Ron Jones, President



Rare Enquist Sandmint, Photo by John Magera

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Did you know?

- 33,000 elephants are killed each year for their tusks
- Poaching elephants for their ivory has reached its highest level since the initial ivory ban in 1989.
- The value of ivory has skyrocketed in the last 14 years from \$5 a pound to \$1,500 a pound.
- More illegal ivory is seized at the Port of Houston than any other U. S. port.



Employee Spotlight



Most organizations have that person or persons behind the scenes whose work may seem, from the outside, less than important to the mission, but which, in fact, keeps the whole thing from grinding to a halt or crashing to the ground. That individual's many duties can include answering the phone, doing purchasing and procurement, timekeeping and other duties sometimes described as mundane.

At the Refuge the individual is Steve Chapman, Administrative Assistant. For most visitors, Steve is the face of the Refuge and the Fish and Wildlife Service. His work station, located in the visitor's center at the refuge, allows him to meet and greet Refuge visitors. Steve is friendly and unassuming, always helpful and ready to answer their questions.

Steve retired from the USAF after a 24 year career as C-130 cargo aircraft Loadmaster. Following his Air Force retirement, he joined the USFWS Office of Subsistence Management* working for the Alaska Region. In 2005 Steve transferred his position at the Refuge.

Although Steve's workstation is a desk, he is hardly a desk jockey. His duties include fire dispatch and when his primary duties allow, you can find Steve outside helping the biologist and maintenance staff.

He is as much at home behind the wheel of a dump truck or tractor as at the keyboard of his computer. When asked he said, "My favorite job is getting out on a tractor and plowing fire breaks on the beautiful prairie".

When he speaks to visitors, Steve feels it is important to remind them that the Refuge is one of the very

few large tracts of coastal prairie left and the home of the Attwater's prairie-chicken. Steve sees visitor, literally from all over the country and the world. He remembers one gentleman, an avid birder old enough to be his father, who was an autocross enthusiast, a sport that Steve is seriously considering. Steve feels that the earlier the better when visiting the Refuge and being the first visitor in the morning is best.

**The Federal Subsistence Management Program is a multi-agency effort to provide the opportunity for a subsistence way of life by rural Alaskans on federal public lands and waters while maintaining healthy populations of fish and wildlife*

At left: Steve Chapman Administrative Technician, at the Refuge, sits at his "indoor" workstation located in the visitor's center.



Photograph by John Magera

APC UPDATE

RECORD ATTWATER'S PRAIRIE-CHICKEN RELEASE FOR 2014

Mike Morrow, Wildlife Biologist

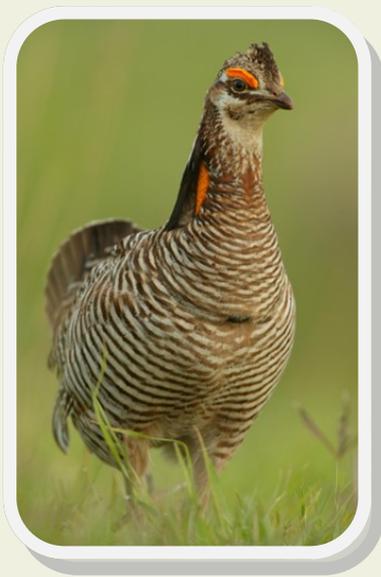
Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, Eagle Lake, Texas

This year's release of birds reared by the Attwater's prairie-chicken (APC) captive breeding program (Abilene Zoo, Caldwell Zoo, Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, Houston Zoo) is one for the record books on two accounts. First, the 351 birds released this year is 23% higher than the previous record of 286 in 2008. Second, since all birds were released at the refuge again this year, this blows the previous record for any one location out of the water. The previous record for a single location was 228 last year at the refuge. The recovery team recommended after the 2011 release that all birds be released at one location (the refuge) for the near future to hopefully build a viable population quicker, and to allow for focused research on limiting factors.

So with that said, everyone immediately wants to know "...how are they doing?" The short answer is about average, so far. The last birds were released from acclimation pens in September, so all have been out for a little over 60 days. Survival to 60 days for this year is 60.5%, and has averaged 67.5% to that point since the release program started almost 20 years ago. This year's survival to date is not statistically different from the average. We have closely monitored post-release survival with radio telemetry from the beginning to provide us with information critical to the recovery program in general, and to improve the release program in particular. Figure 1 shows post-release survival through the years under the current protocol of releasing birds during July–October (with a target of all birds released by mid-September) and a pre-release acclimation period of 10-20 days (target = 14 days). Beginning in 2006, release birds were fed frozen vegetables in increasing amounts (in addition to commercial pellets provided in captivity) until by 2010, birds were transitioned to frozen vegetables before arrival at the release site and only frozen vegetables were offered in acclimation pens.

While Figure 1 probably just looks like a jumble of squiggly lines, I would like to call your attention to two characteristics of those lines: (1) there is tremendous variability in survival through the years, and (2) survival over the last several years has been more consistent, most likely due to the pre-release frozen vegetable diet which helps prepare the gut for the general lack of free water on the prairie during summer months. Figure 1 only shows survival curves for birds released under the current protocol. Considerably more variability would be apparent if survival data for all birds released through the years were shown. When we started the release program in 1995, we weren't sure what the best strategy was for returning APCs to the wild, but we knew that most past restoration efforts involving captive-reared animals of various species had failed. We also knew that we had to make our effort work if we were to save the APC.

Cont. on Page 4



Above: Male APC with radio collar

Photo by Noppadal Paothong

APC Update Cont. from P. 3

With those pieces of negative information as a backdrop, we hypothesized that releasing birds during the summer/early fall when wild broods would naturally be becoming independent from their mothers might be a reasonable time of year for release. We also wanted to use a “soft” release method in which birds are allowed to acclimate for some period at the release site prior to release as opposed to the “hard” releases used by many unsuccessful restocking efforts in which birds are immediately released after transfer from rearing facilities. However, we didn’t know how long to acclimate birds to give them a survival advantage. So we started with a short 3-day period versus a longer 14-day period. The results were immediately clear. Birds kept in acclimation pens for the short 3-day period experienced approximately four times higher mortality during the first 30-days post-release than birds acclimated for two weeks. We have subsequently evaluated 7 versus 14 days acclimation, and survival of the 14-day group was still a statistically significant 50% higher for the longer period.

K-M Survival Curves for APC Released at APCNWR (current protocol)

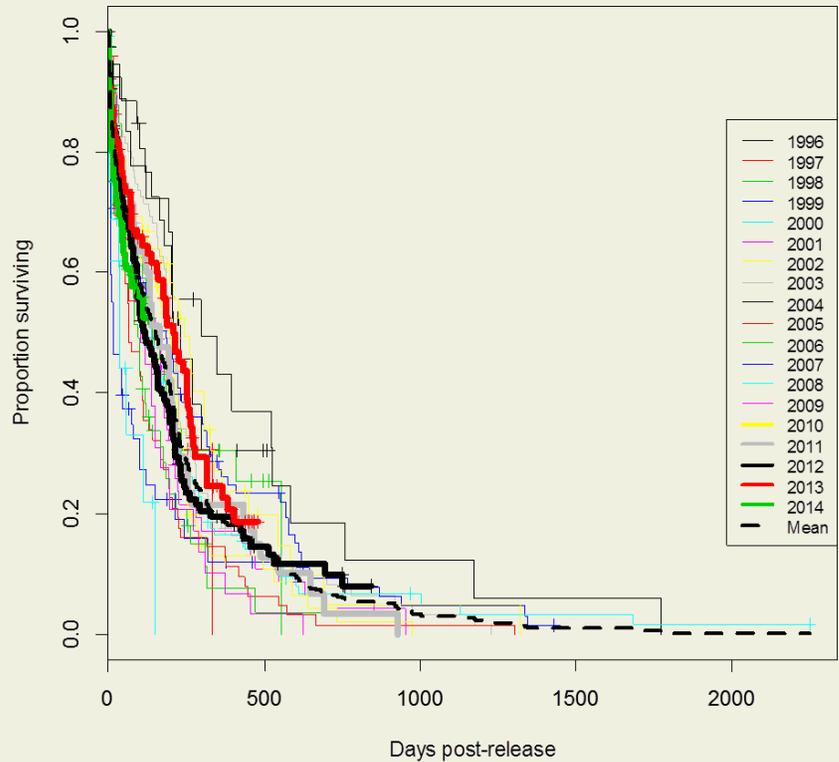


Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier survival estimates by year for Attwater's prairie-chicken released at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge under the current protocol (released July-October, acclimation 10-20 days).

Next we moved to an evaluation of our hypothesis about *when* to release pen-reared APC. One of the facts of life that APCs have to deal with each year is an influx of migrant raptors during the fall and winter. We knew from data collected by a birder who had conducted surveys for several years on the refuge, that the first arrival of migrant northern harriers occurred on average around October 15. So we classified timing of releases based on whether they occurred when migrant raptors were expected to be present or not. Not surprisingly, survival of birds released before arrival of migrant raptors was approximately two times higher than those released when migrant raptors were present. Looking at it on a month-by-month basis (Figure 2, page 6), birds released in July had the highest survival, followed by August and September, then October, and the remaining months declining from there. So in general, the later into the fall and winter releases occurred, the poorer the survival. And certainly releases closer to the breeding season were not very successful as some have suggested to maximize the number of breeders going into the reproductive season.

Cont. on Page 7

You can help with this vital RIFA suppression by supporting the “Fire Ant Control/Brood Survival Fund”

You Can Make A Difference

Friends and members of the Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge: A gentle reminder that the end of the year and the season of giving is approaching. I urge you to consider the Friends organization when deciding which organizations deserve and need your financial support.

Donations to the organization's "Fire Ant Control/Brood Survival Fund" are reserved for projects directly benefiting the Attwater's Prairie Chicken on the Refuge. Mark the comments section of your check, "Brood Fund."

We are also in need of funds for general operating expenses, such as postage, website maintenance, refreshments for volunteers, etc. Your support is essential to our efforts and is greatly appreciated.

The Friends organization is a nonprofit charitable organization designated as a 501(c) 3 by the IRS. Your contribution may be tax deductible. Please consult with your tax advisor.

Checks should be made out to and mailed to Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge at P.O. Box 212, Eagle Lake, TX 77434, or you can donate online at: http://attwater.org/get_involved/

"The World we all share is given to us in trust. Every choice we make regarding the earth, air, and water around us should be made with the objective of preserving it for all generations to come"

August A. Bush III

2014 Student Art Contest Winning Art Work On Exhibit

The art work of all award winners from the Friends 2014 Student Art contest is currently on display at the Live Oak Art Center in Columbus, Texas. It will be there through December 11. The work had previously been on display at the Virgil & Josephine Gordan Memorial Library in Sealy, Texas.

After exhibit at the Live Oak Art Center, the student's work will go

on display at the Rice Medical Center in Eagle Lake, Texas. If you are in the area and your time allows, don't miss the opportunity to see this winning work submitted by the area's talented young people.



Above: winning art work of 2014 Student Art Contest on exhibit at the Virgil & Josephine Gordon Memorial Library in Sealy, Texas.

Spot Something Illegal on a Wildlife Refuge? Email or Call



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has established a

Turn In Poachers (TIPs) Line

to help the public report violations occurring on national wildlife refuges and other Service-managed lands.

People can call **1-844-NWR-TIPS (697-8477)** or email **NWR_TIPs@fws.gov** 24 hours a day. You will be asked for the type of incident as well as the date, place (refuge name or county/state) and approximate time of the incident.

People may leave their name and contact information, which will aid law enforcement in the response and investigation. They also may remain anonymous. Any contact information provided will be used for official purposes only.



At Right: USFWS Refuge Officer, Shelby Finney, displays illegally taken waterfowl that have been tagged as evidence.

USFWS photo

Don't Miss the Christmas Bird Count

The Attwater's Christmas Bird Count, in Eagle Lake, Texas will be held on Wednesday, December 17, 2014. Join us for a wonderful opportunity to bird the Refuge. This event is open to all birders and is one of the highest inland Christmas Bird Counts, for diversity, in the Country. A hot dinner will be provided, at the Refuge, to all participants following the event. If you are interested in participating, please contact : Sumita Prasad at

sumita@alumni.utexas.net

Our Mission

The mission of the Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge is to support the purpose and objectives of Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR and promote the recovery of the Attwater's prairie chicken and the Texas native coastal prairie ecosystem for this and future generations.

APC Update Cont. from P.4

In summary, I hope you can appreciate from the foregoing discussion that there is much more to the APC release program than throwing a bunch of birds onto the prairie and watching what happens. A tremendous amount of effort has been, and continues to be, expended on evaluating and improving this release program so that the APC does not become extinct on our watch. The 19% average annual post-release survival that we have observed (Figure 1) is far and away better than that reported in the literature for

other pen-reared gallinaceous species including greater prairie-chickens, pheasants, bobwhites, grey partridge, and capercaillies, most of which reported few if any surviving to one year post-release. Further, this article touches on only one facet (post-release survival) of the evaluation necessary for effective adaptive management of the APC release program. Another major area of emphasis has been to collect data on reproductive success of APCs after release, which I have written about in previous editions of The Boomer.

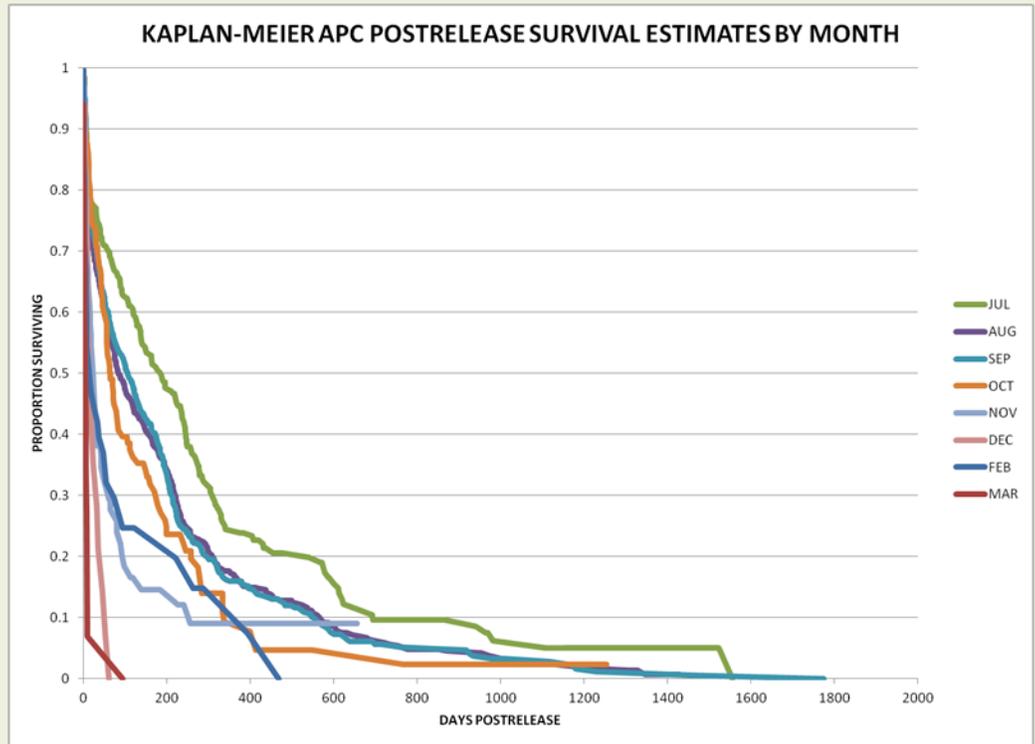


Figure 2. Kaplan-Meier estimates of Attwater's prairie-chicken post-release survival by month of release at the Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge, the Texas City Prairie Preserve, and private lands in Goliad County, Texas from 1996–2011.

Membership

Interested in becoming a member or want to renew your annual membership ? It is now easy to do ,on-line at

www.attwater.org

We are happy to remind everyone that we are now a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.

Any donations you may make are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law and tax code.

Donors should consult with their tax advisor.

Please consider Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge in your charitable giving.





Attwater's prairie-chickens eating frozen vegetables at release site. Photo credit: Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR staff photo.

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