

National Elk Refuge News – April 13, 2009

2008/09 Sleigh Ride Season Summary



On a crisp, foggy winter morning, sleigh driver Brett Ernstsen takes a group of passengers close to the elk herd for a unique wildlife viewing opportunity.

Ridership

The 2008/09 sleigh ride season ran from December 8, 2008 through April 5, 2009, operating daily except Christmas Day.

December Ridership

2008 — 4,017
2007 — 5,054
2006 — 4,694

January Ridership

2009 — 5,686
2008 — 5,523
2007 — 4,403

February Ridership

2009 — 6,948
2008 — 7,310
2007 — 5,157

March / April Ridership

2009 — 5,304
2008 — 7,801
2007 — 3,808

Total Ridership

2008/2009 — 21,955
2007/2008 — 25,679
2006/2007 — 18,062

The sleigh ride program saw a decrease in numbers this season compared to the previous year, likely affected by national and international economic conditions. December's significant drop in numbers correlated to severe weather experienced in the Jackson Hole valley during the last nine days of the month, bringing several feet of snow and strong winds that

*Pictured
left to right:
Jan Lynch, Grand
Teton Association;
Kristen Gilbert
and Lori Iverson,
National Elk
Refuge; Chris
Warburton, Double
H Bar, Inc.*



impacted visibility, transportation, and recreation.

Below are the monthly ridership numbers compared to the 2007/08 season :

December — 20.5% decrease
January — 3.0% increase
February — 5.0% decrease
March/April — 32.0% decrease
Total Ridership —14.5% decrease

The sleigh ride numbers, though down from 2007/08 for three of the four months, held steady compared to other reported visitor service statistics. The lodging statistics provided to the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, comparing 2008/09 to the previous season, showed the following decline:

December — 10% decrease
January — 12% decrease
February — 13% decrease
March — 11% decrease

Additionally, enplanements from December through March at the Jackson Hole Airport were down about 13.5%. For the first three months of 2009, Teton County's taxable sales were down 9% from

the same 2008 period, indicating a decrease in spending.

Awards

2008 Outreacher Award

The partnership between the National Elk Refuge, Double H Bar, Inc., and Grand Teton Association, and was honored at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Regional Director's Award Ceremony held in Denver on July 28, 2008. Jan Lynch, Executive Director for the Association, served as the representative to accept the Outreacher Honor Award, which recognizes excellent achievement in an outreach endeavor that focuses on the conservation of the Mountain-Prairie Region's natural resources and beauty.

The three organizations work closely together from December through April to offer the interpretive sleigh rides on the refuge. Double H Bar, Inc., a Jackson based corporation, is currently contracted to provide

interpretive sleigh rides on the National Elk Refuge through the 2011-2012 season. Through extensive pre-season training, regular communications, and flexibility, the organizations have focused on transitioning the recreational activity into a quality interpretive experience.

A percentage of the sleigh ride revenue is paid to the National Elk Refuge and administered by the Grand Teton Association. The funds are then used to further develop and fund interpretive, educational, and public use projects on the National Elk Refuge.

Western Hospitality Award
Chris and Jeff Warburton of Double H Bar, Inc. were awarded the Western Hospitality Award

Winter naturalist Susan Owen and sleigh driver Brad Feik talk during a stop while on a sleigh ride with area high school students.



by Jackson Mayor Mark Barron on April 3, 2009 at the Jackson Hole & Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center. The Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce's Membership Committee created the Western Hospitality Award to recognize Jackson area employees who provide exemplary customer service. The Warburtons were the 10th recipient of the award.

Interpretive Training

Two full time and one part time naturalist were hired to provide education and interpretation during the sleigh ride season and offer visitor services at the Jackson Hole & Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center.

Both winter naturalists and sleigh drivers received training prior to the start of the season. The in-depth, two day sessions included an overview of National Elk Refuge management and policies, biology and disease updates, and interpretive methods and techniques. In addition to orientation, the National Elk Refuge provided all sleigh ride staff with an interpretive handbook.

This year, the training was also offered to representatives from a number of area wildlife tour companies who include the National Elk Refuge on many of their guided trips. A representative of the Grand Teton Association also attended the training.

Sleigh Ride Interpretation

The sleigh ride contractor continued to demonstrate a strong commitment to high quality interpretation by instilling in the drivers both the enthusiasm and

knowledge to make the sleigh rides a unique educational experience. Programs were monitored formally and informally throughout the season by refuge staff and volunteers as well as interpretive and concession specialists from throughout the area. The sleigh ride audits were implemented to monitor visitors' experiences and ensure identified refuge themes were covered.

Winter naturalists also provided interpretation on sleighs, particularly with school groups. In all, they made 818 contacts with school groups on sleighs.

Winter Programs

In addition to programs offered on the horse-drawn sleigh rides,

a number of other programs were offered to the public while visiting the refuge this winter.

Visitor Center

Naturalists gave short interpretive programs in the visitor center, offering sleigh riders an activity as they waited for the next departing sleigh. A 15-minute program entitled *Feature Creature* was offered daily at 11:00 AM, giving visitors an opportunity to learn about the lives and homes of some of the resident wildlife. A different creature was featured daily. A total of 538 people attended a *Feature Creature* presentation this season.

Wildlife Caravans

Naturalists offered a winter wildlife caravan two days a week to persons interested in touring on the Refuge Road. The caravan left from the Jackson Hole & Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center at 1:30 PM on Saturdays and Sundays and stopped in the Miller Butte area where bighorn sheep can frequently be seen. Later in the season, the tour included a stop at a wetlands area to view returning waterfowl. A spotting scope and binoculars were provided for use on the tours. A total of 204 people participated in 26 wildlife caravans.

Environmental Education

The refuge's *Journals and JPGs: Seasons on the Refuge* environmental education program for area second graders utilized the sleigh rides again this year as part of the program's winter sessions. The year-long program allows students to experience the refuge under different conditions throughout the school year and focuses on various aspects of the refuge's wildlife and habitat. The program incorporates both scientific and artistic approaches to learning.

A group of local students on spring break were treated to a special wildlife caravan, organized by the Teton County Parks & Recreation Department.





Sleigh driver Steve Castagno guides a group of second graders on an environmental education field trip.

A new environmental education program was developed this year for several groups of English Language Learners (ELL) from the Jackson middle school and high school. Sleigh rides were incorporated into the program that targets both an increase in language proficiency and a basic

knowledge of local wildlife and habitat.

“Let’s Get Outside” Special Events Solstice Celebration

A free family event was held on December 23 at the visitor center to celebrate the winter solstice and the changes the season brings. Participants had a range of activities from which to choose. Both indoor and outdoor activities were offered, including a science station, an art activity, and a snowshoe hike.

Day of Discovery

The refuge public use staff partnered with the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival to offer an event that was one in a series of organized outreach programs planned for the Latino community this year. Carmina Oaks, executive director of the Latino Resource Center, facilitated the event, developed to expand the outdoor experiences of Latinos families who live and work in the valley. Many of the collaborative programs like the *Day of Discovery* have come from requests by Latinos in the community, including the outing on the National Elk Refuge.



A family poses next to the team of horses that pulled their sleigh during the Day of Discovery event on the National Elk Refuge.

Fifty people enjoyed the event on the refuge. Participants were charged a nominal fee, with additional costs supported by grants. The trip included a sleigh ride onto the refuge, a tour and wildlife film at the National Museum of Wildlife Art, and lunch.

Discovering Wildlife through the Lens of a Camera

A family event centered around photography was offered on March 6, giving participants an opportunity to be creative with digital cameras, attend several naturalist-led sessions, make a picture frame, and download their favorite image of the day for entry into an amateur photo contest. Participants checked in at a welcome station and were given a booklet outlining the various stations. The self-paced selection of activities gave them the flexibility to work within their own time constraints and interests. While at the visitor center, each family had access to a digital camera, made

possible through a partnership with the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival.

Media

In addition to local media coverage of the sleigh rides, several larger media markets and advertisers utilized the sleigh rides to film or view the Jackson Elk Herd, including:

- Kirk Johnson, New York Times
- Shane Moore, National Geographic
- Karla Senties, Sabor e Arte magazine, Mexico
- Jeremy Sparks, Wyoming Travel and Tourism
- Bobbi Bird, Snozone, Calgary, and Vue Weekly, Edmonton, Alberta
- Heike Schmidt, German Press Agency
- Sonja Stimer, Spirit of the West magazine; Germany, Switzerland, Austria

Participants in a family event look out over the National Elk Refuge from a viewing platform at the visitor center.

