December Numbers Set New Visitation Records

The Christmas and New Year holidays are often characterized as a time of hustle and bustle, and that certainly rang true this season at the National Elk Refuge as record numbers of passengers participated in the wildlife refuge’s most popular winter program.

From mid-December through early April, the Refuge offers guided sleigh ride trips to the visiting public. The unique wildlife viewing program allows guests to take a horse-drawn ride among the Refuge’s wintering elk.

The program continues to gain in popularity, reaching a record-setting pace last year. So far this season, the program is on track to become yet another banner year.

“Christmas week is historically our busiest of the season,” explained Lori Iverson, who oversees the Refuge’s public use program. “We expected some increase this past holiday season, but instead we saw a tremendous jump in numbers. It speaks to the quality and uniqueness of the program.”

Sleigh rides operate daily including holidays and weekends, except for Christmas Day.

A total of 5,799 passengers took a sleigh ride from December 24 through December 31, a 26% increase from last year’s 4,595 total for the same seven days. It took 368 sleigh trips to accommodate the high volume of passengers, maxing out the wagons that can carry approximately 15 people at a time. Last year, the sleigh ride contractor ran 300 sleighs during the same week.

The sleigh rides are operated by Double H Bar, Inc., a private contractor working closely with the National Elk Refuge to offer a safe, quality educational experience.

Jeff Warburton, who runs the sleigh ride concession with his brother, Chris, noted another milestone last month: breaking the mark of over 900 passengers in a single day. “The most passengers we’d ever had on any one day was back in 2015 on Valentine’s Day, when we had 864 people participate in a ride,” Warburton said. “We broke that record two weeks ago on December 26 with 890 people,” he said.
From there, the week’s numbers continued to rise. A total of 924,909, and 961 passengers took part in an interpretive ride on December 29-31, respectively.

“It was all hands on deck,” Warburton added. “It took everyone – the Refuge and Visitor Center staffs, the drivers, our ticket desk – to make this happen,” he said. “You can’t be a well-oiled machine without everybody pitching in.”

At the same time, the Visitor Center was seeing a steady stream of visitors, too. A total of 14,657 people filed through the facility during the same seven days, visiting with winter naturalists, enjoying the displays and interactive exhibits, and taking part in crafts and other activities the staff provides to guests waiting or returning from a sleigh ride.

Visitation at the Visitor Center hit an all-time high in 2016, with 336,755 people stopping at the interagency building. Numbers there are on the rise, too. The 2016 visitation represents a 5% increase from the previous year as well as a 10% increase over the previous 5-year average.

The Jackson Hole & Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center has ranked as the second-most visited visitor center in the National Wildlife Refuge System for several years behind Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, which reported 334,462 in fiscal year 2015.

At times of peak visitation, the Visitor Center parking lot can become very congested. “During this past December’s holiday week, we had cars circling the parking lot waiting for a space to open,” Iverson described. “It got quite competitive.”

Several alternatives are available to Visitor Center guests to ease the parking congestion. The Town of Jackson’s Home Ranch public parking lot is a few blocks south of the Visitor Center and within an easy walking distance. Teton County’s public bus service, the START Bus, operates several routes that include stops at nearby downtown locations.

Visitor Center hours are from 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM daily; sleigh rides operate from 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM.