The National Wildlife Refuge System is now 105 years young

by Doug Newbould

In March, the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) marked its 105th anniversary as the only network of Federal lands devoted specifically to the conservation of wildlife and habitats. From its humble beginnings at Pelican Island in Florida, the National Wildlife Refuge System now consists of 548 Refuges and 37 Wetland Management Districts on more than 96 million acres. And as it so happened, I spent that anniversary day traveling between two of our National Wildlife Refuges: from Santa Ana NWR in the southern-most reaches of Texas to my home unit here at the Kenai NWR.

One of the contrasts between these two crown jewels of the NWRS could not have been more apparent that day, as the weather forecast for McAllen, Texas was for a high temperature of 102° with a predicted relative humidity of 1%. In weather geek circles, those weather readings are what we call—Hot & Dry, and something we might expect in Death Valley or the Mojave in March. When I landed in Anchorage later that day the temperature was 20°, with plenty of ice and snow to remind me that winter had not quite released its grip on south-central Alaska.

I had just completed a week of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service fire management meetings as the Alaska Region's representative on the National Fire Operations and Safety Team. The team meets twice a year to discuss wildland fire operations and firefighter safety issues and to develop procedural and policy recommendations for the National Fire Leadership Team. We're basically a sub-committee of nine regional fire professionals who develop proposals/products for review and approval by the national decision-makers. Gathering each spring and fall, we rotate our meetings from region to region in order to meet local fire staffs and hear about local issues.

While visiting the Santa Ana NWR (near Alamo, Texas), we had the honor of meeting some of the refuge and fire management staff who conserve and protect almost 200,000 acres of refuge lands in the South Texas Refuge Complex (STRC)—which encompasses three National Wildlife Refuges and more than 100 land parcels from the south Texas coast and Laguna Atascosa NWR up the Lower Rio Grande River Valley to the Falcon Dam northwest of Roma, Texas.

This complex of Refuge lands encompasses only about 5% of the remaining native landscape and habitats of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where ocelots, indigo snakes and an amazing variety of birds such as green jays, great kiskadees and chachalacas reside. In fact, two of the Refuges in the complex, Laguna Atascosa and Santa Ana, are respectively, the #1 and #2 Refuges in the NWRS for total bird species (almost 500 combined). This is an amazing statistic when you consider that Santa Ana NWR is only about 2,000 acres in size. In contrast, about 150 species of birds have been detected on the Kenai NWR, which at nearly 2 million acres, is almost 1,000 times larger than Santa Ana.

To me it's interesting to compare and contrast two refuges that seem so far apart climatically, geographically, ecologically and programmatically. And yet, there are similarities. Both refuges were established during World War II: Kenai in 1941 and Santa Ana in 1943. The Kenai National Moose Range was established to protect the 'giant Kenai moose' and Santa Ana was established to protect migratory birds. Isn't it fascinating that while our nation's attention was focused upon the great world war, the very American process of conserving wildlife and habitat continued unabated?

While the diversity of wildlife and habitats in the South Texas Refuge Complex is astounding (1,200 species of plants, 700 vertebrate species including 500 birds, 300 butterflies and 11 distinct biological communities, from the Chihuahuan thorn forest to the tidal wetlands along the Gulf Coast), the fragmentation of those lands and habitats adds a whole other dimension and level of complexity to conservation and fire management practices.

With a combined staff of about 65 employees and a couple dozen wonderful volunteers (during the peak birding season—winter), the folks at the STRC have developed some innovative and unique solutions for some of the conservation challenges they face. In their

efforts to restore native habitats on some of the disturbed agricultural lands in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, they have established a native plant nursery at Santa Ana. And to protect the fire-intolerant, old-growth Mesquite forest habitat and the species that call the Santa Ana Refuge home, Refuge staff and volunteers provide daily guided tours for about 150,000 visitors annually.

Wildland fire management is just one of many critical refuge programs at the STRC, but without the dedicated service of the men and women in the fire staff refuge managers might not achieve many of the purposes and objectives of the refuges in the complex. Just like the Kenai NWR, over 90% of the wildland fire ignitions in the Complex are human-caused. With limited wildland firefighting resources in south Texas, FWS fire managers have partnered with several municipal/volunteer fire departments in the Valley to manage a very active wildland fire regime.

During our visit to the region, our team was able to observe the effective cooperation of these agencies as collaboratively, they responded to—and successfully suppressed multiple wildland fires, protecting several communities and sensitive habitats in the process. We too, at the Kenai NWR, must and do work collaboratively with our land and fire management partner agencies to effectively respond to wildland fires.

At first glance, the Refuges in south Texas might seem to have little in common with our Refuges here in Alaska. But upon further examination, you can see why our similarities and common mission and purposes have resulted in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Happy birthday, NWRS!

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/.