



# Refuge Update

January 2026

Published quarterly by the Amigos de la Sevilleta

*Board meetings are held the second Thursday of most months. However, the next board meeting is our Annual Board Meeting, and will be held on Saturday, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2:00-4 pm at the Visitor Center. It will include a guest speaker and light fare. There will not be a Zoom option.*

## Refuge Update

Jeff Sanchez, Refuge Manager

As many of you likely know, there have recently been and will continue to be significant changes to National Wildlife Refuges across the nation. Last year, the US Fish & Wildlife Service saw many experienced employees from top to bottom retire and/or leave the agency. We have been extremely lucky here at Sevilleta NWR in that our team remains intact, with the only vacancy being the Visitor Services position. Vacant for several years already, it now seems unlikely that we will be able to re-fill that position. Rather, we will adapt and continue to change the way in which this station operates.

Other Refuges in the local area currently have numerous staffing vacancies. With our strong Sevilleta team, we are poised to support other refuges in the Region (Arizona and New Mexico) and looking for ways to share resources. In this way, we can prioritize and achieve the most important goals within the Region as a whole.

To date, Sevilleta team members have been working with and supporting Valle de Oro NWR,

San Andres NWR, Northern New Mexico Complex, Bitter Lake NWR and Bosque del Apache NWR, sharing resources, equipment and effort. At this time, Ethan Hammer, Sevilleta NWR's Wildlife Refuge Specialist, is acting as Refuge Manager at Valle de Oro NWR, and will continue to serve in that role until late March. Bosque del Apache NWR will be sharing Shayla March (biologist) with Sevilleta to enhance her experience and support the needs of both stations. I believe this will likely be the "new normal" for refuges - a model that sees Service employees focusing not solely on independent needs, but rather working cooperatively to prioritize focus on all needs within the Region.

In addition, we will begin prioritizing projects and looking for ways to bring our focus and project footprints down to a realistic/achievable level, given the resources at our disposal. We will not have the opportunity to expand greatly outside of what we already have in the works. Several focal projects include Bolson Tortoise work, Invasive Species work (including expansion of

specialized hunts for oryx), Right-of-Way/Easement permit compliance, current research footprint (no expansion), spring/drinker protection, water savings/wetland work and several other high-profile needs.

We are also entering into a time in which we will need to team up and share resources with not only Service team members, but also our cooperating agencies, such as the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. We are currently

working on a Memorandum of Understanding to share equipment and effort to achieve valley-wide goals, rather than separate goals. This, in my opinion, could help us better shape the valley for the benefit of native wildlife, such as cranes and waterfowl, by providing additional high-quality habitat in a combined team effort. All in all, we are looking at these changes as an opportunity for relationship growth with our cooperators, allowing us to look at the landscape more holistically.

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Los Pinos Mountains bordering the east edge of the refuge. While we often associate yuccas with a hot desert scene, those living in the high desert must be adapted to not only the intense heat, winds, sun, and limited rainfall of the summer season, but also to harsh winter weather. The Soapweed Yucca, *Yucca glauca*, also called the Narrowleaf Yucca, is scattered throughout the refuge although most common in upland areas. The plant is cold hardy down to minus 40°F, continuing to photosynthesize, albeit at a much-reduced rate, throughout the winter on sunny days. Its tough, waxy leaves resist desiccation, and the steep-angle of the rosette leaves maximizes exposure to low-angle-winter sun. (This same leaf orientation minimizes exposure to the stressful high noon sun of the summer season.) The sharp tips on the stiff, fibrous leaves discourage browsing. (Photo C. Barnett, December 2018.)

# **Join Us!**

## **Amigos de la Sevilleta**

## **Annual Meeting**

Saturday, January 24, 2026, 2-4 pm  
Visitor Center, Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge

### Program

- Welcome
- Treasurer's Report
- Election of Amigos de la Sevilleta Board Members
- Refuge Manager's Report
- Long Term Ecological Research Update
- Guest Speaker Butterfly Presentation

### **Many Hands, Many Wings: Building a Brighter Future for New Mexico's Butterflies Together**

Simon Donetski (Museum of Southwestern Biology, UNM) will talk about his research on butterflies at Sevilleta and the ways New Mexicans are working together to protect our state's amazingly diverse population of butterflies.



Desert Black Swallowtail  
*Papilio polyxenes*

*Amigos members and the general public are welcome!  
Light refreshments will be served.*

## Ladd Gordon Waterfowl Tour



The Bernardo Waterfowl Management Area is one of four areas that make up the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex in Valencia and Socorro Counties, New Mexico. Together with the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge to the south, they provide habitat and food for half of the waterbirds which overwinter in the Middle Rio Grande Basin.

The Bernardo Waterfowl Area encompasses 1,700 acres, much of which is planted each year with corn, alfalfa, winter wheat and milo to provide food for waterfowl and Sandhill Cranes. This season, a new mix of grasses and radish greens is being tested as a food crop (see p.5).

In addition to providing food crop, Bernardo provides essential resting habitat in the form of artificially flooded fields where birds are

relatively safe from predators. More than 25,000 Snow Geese and 12,000 Sandhill Cranes winter in the Middle Rio Grande, and Bernardo plays a crucial role here. Visitors can enjoy this avian winter activity along a three-mile vehicle tour loop. Also, there are three elevated observation platforms for the public to use for viewing or photography.

Michael Chavez (Conservation Officer, NM Department of Game and Fish), arranged for David Silva to give the Amigos a tour of the Bernardo Waterfowl Area on November 21. Mr. Silva is one of the farmers tending the land and planting food crops at Bernardo. The tour proved to be an excellent adventure full of bird sightings!





# Meet the Big Guys

Sandy Barnett

The bugling call of the Sandhill Cranes overhead along the Middle Rio Grande Valley is a familiar fall sound as the birds migrate here for the winter. But did you know that there are actually five, possibly six (in dispute) subspecies? Two of these come to New Mexico from northern breeding grounds to overwinter: the Greater Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis tabida*) is most common in the middle Rio Grande corridor, while the Lesser Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis canadensis*) is most abundant in eastern New Mexico although it also uses the Rio Grande Valley. The complex of Sandhills includes:

Three non-migratory subspecies:

1. Cuban Sandhill Crane (*A. c. nesiotes*): endemic to the island of Cuba
2. Florida Sandhill Crane (*A. c. pratensis*): endemic to Florida and Southern Georgia
3. Mississippi Sandhill Crane (*A. c. pulla*): primarily a resident of the area in and around the Mississippi Sandhill Crane Refuge and its coastal plain habitat, although historically it was more widespread along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida

Two migratory subspecies:

1. Lesser Sandhill Crane (*A. c. canadensis*): breeds in the High Arctic Canada, Alaska, and

northeastern Siberia; winters primarily in the American Southwest and Mexico

2. Greater Sandhill Crane: breeds in eastern Siberia, across much of Alaska, northern Canada, including Baffin Island, and extending south into the northern U.S. (Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Wyoming), Colorado, and northern parts of California; winters across the southern U.S. and northern Mexico, with major populations in the Central Valley of California, the Lower Colorado River Valley (AZ/CA/Mexico), New Mexico's Middle Rio Grande, and Florida, plus the Gulf Coast states of Texas, Louisiana, and Georgia.

A third subspecies of migratory crane, the Canadian Sandhill Crane (*A. c. rowani*) is not universally recognized. It may be an intermediate or hybrid between the Greater and Lesser Sandhill Cranes with which it shares its range.

The subspecies of cranes vary primarily in size and weight, with plumage being broadly similar across all types. Plumage is the same for males and females. Adults are pale to medium gray overall; during breeding, their plumage is usually much worn and stained from mud, and can look nearly ochre. (This is particularly prominent in Florida Sandhill Cranes that live year-round in iron-rich muddy marshes.)



Greater Sandhill Crane. In flight, these birds keep their long, dark legs trailing straight back and their long necks straight forward. Their distinctive, far-carrying bugling calls while in flight help to maintain flock cohesion. Click [here](#) to listen to the bugling of the Greater Sandhill Crane (Photo: F. Schulenburg)

Mature Sandhill Cranes have red foreheads, white cheeks, and long, dark, pointed bills. Immature birds have reddish-brown upper parts and gray underparts. At birth, these cranes, called “colts,” are covered in cinnamon brown downy feathers that provide camouflage. They gradually transition to gray feathers as they mature, but do not have the characteristic red foreheads until sexually mature, making them easy to distinguish from adults even when close to full size. First nesting is usually deferred until more than three years of age.

The Lesser Sandhill is the smallest of the subspecies, typically standing 3-3.5 ft tall, weighing 6-8 lbs, and boasting an impressive 6-7 ft wingspan. The Greater Sandhill is the largest subspecies, standing 4.5-5 ft tall, weighing 9-14 lbs, with a wingspan of up to 7 ft. While height in Sandhill Cranes is the same for the sexes, weight is not. Males are up to several pounds heavier than females.



Lesser Sandhill Crane (foreground) mixed with a flock of Greater Sandhill Cranes (Photo: FlockingAround.com)

#### Fun Facts:

- With a fossil record extending back at least 2.5 million years, possibly much longer, the Sandhill Cranes has the oldest fossil history of any living species of bird.
- Sandhill Cranes are mostly herbivorous, but eat a wide range of foods, depending on availability.

Their diet includes seeds, tubers, small mammals and reptiles, eggs of other birds, and invertebrates such as insects, worms, clams, and crayfish. Their sturdy, serrated bill helps them snag slippery prey.

- Both migratory and non-migratory Sandhill Cranes are considered to be monogamous, forming a strong, life-time pair bond - which can be two decades or more - although they will find a new partner if a mate dies. However, there is some evidence for polygyny (males paired concurrently with multiple females).
- Females normally lay two eggs, occasionally one, and rarely three. However, often only one young survives due to sibling rivalry.
- A hatchling crane is precocious, able to walk around and self-feed just hours after hatching although its parents continue to protect the colt and provide warmth in the nest for an extended period. Colts make their first flight at around 65-75 days of age. They often accompany their parents during their first fall migration, staying with them for about nine to ten months before becoming independent.

#### Sources:

- Dividing Lines: Genetic Structure Splits Western Sand Hill Crane Populations. 2025. [Rare Bird Alert](#)
- Ivey, G. L., and C. W. August. 2025. [Evidence of polygyny in a greater sandhill crane. Proceedings of the North American Crane Workshop](#) 16:224-225.
- Sandhill Crane. [Cornell Lab All About Birds](#).
- Sandhill Crane. [International Crane Foundation](#).
- Sandhill Crane. [Wikipedia](#)
- Stone, Kate. *Antigone canadensis*, sandhill crane. [USDA Forest Service Research & Development](#).
- Lesser Sandhill Crane or Greater Sandhill Crane – The Sandhill Crane Subspecies. [Flocking Around](#).

## Life on the Wild Side

As in past years, the Amigos participated in the Wildlife Zone Children's Festival in the fall of 2025. It's a free, annual family event, sponsored by the Friends of Bosque Del Apache, that focuses on nature-themed kids' activities and wildlife education. The October 18<sup>th</sup> festival was held at the Socorro Convention Center.

The Amigos created a fun station devoted to the Bolson Tortoise. There was a large display board with questions about the animal. Children answered the questions and received prizes. They could also enjoy coloring a take-home drawing of a Bolson Tortoise.



Amigos Member Melissa Edmonson (pictured) staffed our booth along with Board member Joan Kopietz at the Wildlife Zone

# Nature Store



Winter is upon us and the Nature Store has new Bolson Tortoise long sleeve t-shirts. They come in three colors: athletic grey, dark green and heather blue, all available in 5 sizes, small to 2X.

The mini block animals have sold so well we now carry 12 different animals!



– Visit the Nature store at the Amigos Annual Meeting Jan 24, 2-4PM –

If you are interested in volunteering at the Visitor Center and the Nature Store, please contact Joan Kopietz 248-625-8677 or [joankopietz@gmail.com](mailto:joankopietz@gmail.com)

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## Contacts

Amigos Website: [amigosdelasevilleta.org](http://amigosdelasevilleta.org)

Amigos on Facebook: [facebook.com/amigossevilleta](https://www.facebook.com/amigossevilleta)

Un Amigo: [members@amigosdelasevilleta.org](mailto:members@amigosdelasevilleta.org)

Refuge Website: [fws.gov/refuge/sevilleta](http://fws.gov/refuge/sevilleta)

## Editor's Note

Items for consideration in the Refuge Update are encouraged.

Please email your submission in Word format to [sandybarnett95@gmail.com](mailto:sandybarnett95@gmail.com)

Past editions of this Newsletter are available at the Amigos website:

[amigosdelasevilleta.org/contacts](http://amigosdelasevilleta.org/contacts)