



Refuge Update

July 2026

Published quarterly by the Amigos de la Sevilleta

Board meetings are held the second Thursday of most months. The next board meeting will be held on Thursday, August 13th, 2:00-3:30 pm at the Visitor Center. You are welcome to attend in person, or contact Colin Barnett (members@amigosdelasevilleta.org) for a Zoom link.

Refuge Update

Ethan Hammer, Wildlife Refuge Specialist

For this month's management narrative, we are going to do things a little bit differently than in the past. To start with, the refuge management team would like to provide a few bullet points outlining the top priority projects we are currently working on. It will then be followed up by a short summary from our biological interns who are working on the much more interesting projects. Here we go!

- The Environmental Assessment for cleaning up regulations and expanding hunting/fishing opportunities closed on June 26th. The proposed hunting/fishing package aimed to clean up verbiage within our current hunt regulations, proposed opening opportunities to align more closely with our neighboring cooperators, proposed opening opportunities to help control non-native Oryx, and proposed opening fishing on Refuge waterways.

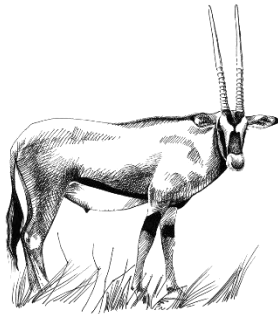
- Refuge and Ecological Services Staff along with Refuge Volunteers completed construction of our second tortoise pen that is designed to harbor larger tortoises and provide a more accessible location for limited demonstration purposes.
- The Refuge received support to upgrade some of our entry signs. The Refuge should receive a new front gate sign and signs for other public areas of the Refuge in mid to late July.
- We also received funding and support to clean-up a former shooting range that was located on refuge property.

Laura Chan is the Invasive Ungulate Intern. In June she led surveys to estimate the population of Oryx on the Refuge. Oryx surveys take place on the eastern side of the Refuge along

predetermined routes; all large animals are counted if they are observed. She has helped with construction of the new Bolson tortoise enclosure. There are a number of suspected springs and water sources on the Refuge that have not been investigated. Laura has begun visiting these sites to determine if the recorded location is accurate and confirm if there is water there in order to have updated information on the water sources available to wildlife on the Refuge.

For the month of June, Endi Piovesana primarily

worked on assisting with the construction of the new Bolson Tortoise demonstration pen, which was finally completed on June 25th. Additionally, he has been continuing to conduct health assessments on the Bolson Tortoises in the Antelope Well enclosure that did not have health assessments completed in the Fall of 2025. He has been compiling this health assessment data and complete life history of each tortoise into a master document. This document will provide a complete reference of each tortoise's health and growth over the course of their lives.



Oryx gazella, the South African Oryx or gemsbok, is native to the Kalahari and Namib Deserts, areas in which it is well adapted for survival. Introduced into White Sands, New Mexico in the late 19th century as a game species, it has spread north as far as Socorro County, including Sevilleta NWR.

President's Message

Joan Kopietz

Hola, Amigos,

The last few months I have asked members to volunteer and submit your ideas for activities and projects. The Amigos Board is listening and as a result approved a community-wide event for August.

Amigos de la Sevilleta will host a lecture series all four Fridays in August in the Conference Room at the Visitor Center, Sevilleta Nature Connections & Confections. See the next page for details.

The Amigos will represent the Sevilleta at the

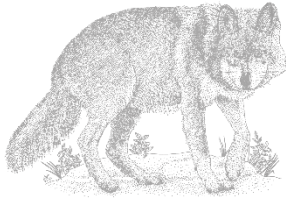
Isleta Environmental Fair. This event is Saturday July 25 at the Isleta Rec Center – 10AM to 2PM.

Later in the summer, Saturday Sept 26, Amigos de la Sevilleta will participate in the Bosque del Apache Wildlife Zone. The hours are 9AM to 4PM. Bring your kids for this educational experience at their Visitor Center.

Have a Great Summer.

Joan

Sevilleta Nature Connections & Confections



A Free Lecture Series, August 2026

Sevilleta NWR Visitor Center 12:30 - 2:30PM

40 Refuge Road, San Acacia, NM 87831 (Exit 169 on I-25)

August 7 – Fast, Feisty & Flamboyant: Hummingbird Basics

Sandra Noll, Naturalist and Lecturer

This delightful program brings you into the secret world of these unique little birds whose high-speed lives are largely invisible to us. Details of hummingbird biology and behavior are revealed through slow motion video.

August 14 - Archaeology on the Sevilleta

Natalie Sanford, USFWS Archaeologist for New Mexico & Arizona

This lecture reviews the archaeology and history of the Refuge over 13,000 years.

August 21 - Mexican Grey Wolf Today

Agapito Lopez, Mexican Grey Wolf Biological Technician

This presentation will cover conservation efforts that USFWS has taken for the recovery and survival of the species.

August 28 - Bolson Tortoise Basics: ‘La Tortuga Grande’ of the Chihuahuan Desert

Christiane Wiese, PhD Senior Biologist with Turner Endangered Species Fund and Bolson Tortoise Project Lead at Ladder and Armendaris Ranches, **Vance Wolf**, USFWS Biologist for Bolson Tortoise, and **Samuel Vassallo**, Sevilleta NWR Wildlife Refuge Biologist

Captive-raised Bolson Tortoises have recently been transferred to a private ranch (Armendaris) and public lands (Sevilleta NWR). The goal is to establish free-ranging populations of this iconic species on the grasslands of the Northern Chihuahuan Desert in New Mexico, within its former range. This lecture focuses on what we have learned during two decades of studying Bolson Tortoises in the US about the biology and the ecology of this valuable member of a healthy desert ecosystem and on the future plans for the species.

Desserts provided



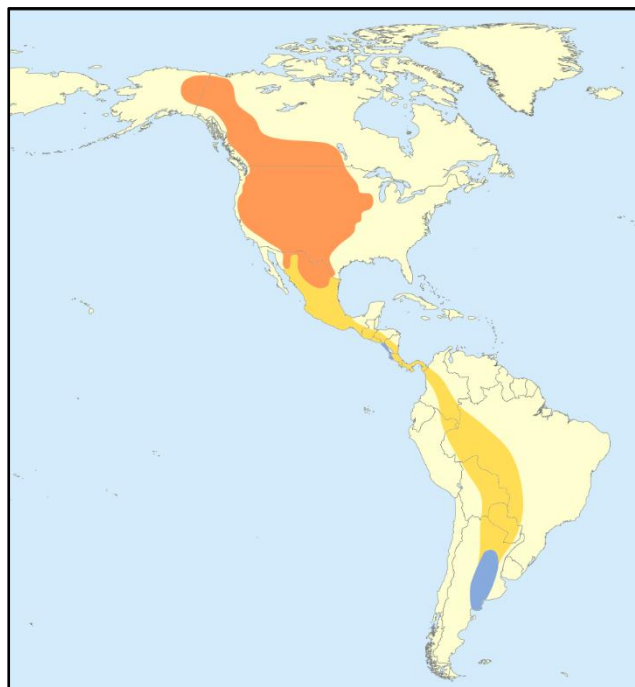
No registration required

A Part-Time Refuge Resident

Jennifer Keyser, Amigos Member

Several of the animals that can be seen and appreciated at Sevilleta spend much of their lifespan either within, or close by the Refuge's boundaries. But others inhabit the Refuge for just part of the year, using its lands and waters to support their migratory life patterns. The part-time Refuge resident which likely has the longest journey between "homes" is a unique raptor – the Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*).

Depending on the time of year and the phase of their annual migration, Swainson's Hawks ("Swainson's") can be found in several Canadian Provinces, throughout much of the western United States, and southward as far as Argentina. They inhabit North America mainly in the spring and summer, as it is that continent



Range of Swainson's Hawk
Breeding ■ Migration ■ Nonbreeding ■



Photo: R. Palmer.

which holds their breeding grounds. They "winter" in South America when it's actually summer in the Southern Hemisphere.

Swainson's have the second longest migration route of any North American raptor (after the Arctic Peregrine Falcon). Their flight from North America to South America can stretch to well over 6,000 miles. Each migration lasts at least two months.

These hawks live in open areas, including grasslands, savannas, steppes, and cultivated lands. At Sevilleta, they hunt in the larger grassland areas of the Refuge, which is where

they can most frequently be seen. They are slightly smaller than their Red-tailed cousins, having a body length of 19 to 22 inches and a weight of 1 ½ to 2 ½ pounds. Their wingspan is 48 to 56 inches, just longer than that of the Red-tailed. They can be seen in two distinct color patterns: the more common light morph and a dark morph. Light morph birds' most readily distinguishing feature may be their rust-colored chest "bib," which is easy to see as they hunt from atop utility poles or bare trees. Dark morphs are brown, except for a light patch under the tail.

Swainson's are thought to be monogamous, and breeding pairs may return to previous nesting sites. Females lay 2 to 4 bluish white to dull white, brown-flecked eggs. Incubation is mostly



Light morph Swainson's Hawk
(Photo: F. Pinasco)

done by the female, for about 34-35 days. Males bring food to the females during this time. After hatching, chicks can fly after about 42-44 days. The young remain with their parents until the



Dark morph Swainson's Hawk
(Photo: J. Lopez))

fall migration southward.

When it isn't breeding season, Swainson's are almost exclusively insectivorous, feeding mainly on grasshoppers, locusts, and beetles. Once they have chicks to feed, their diet changes. They then specialize in hunting small prey such as bats, mice, ground squirrels, birds, and snakes.

Current estimates of Swainson's populations run from 800,000 to 900,000, making its conservation status that of an International Union for Conservation of Nature ("IUCN") Species of Least Concern. They do face specific threats to their numbers, including poisoning from pesticides, hunting, collisions with man-

made structures and habitat loss.

A few more facts about Swainson's Hawks follow:

- During migration, their flocks can number in the thousands.
- While migrating, the birds may travel for several days without feeding.
- Swainson's have smaller feet than other raptors of similar size because they hunt relatively small prey, particularly insects.

National Audubon Society. Swainson's Hawk. [Bird Guide](#).

Cornell Lab. Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni*. [Birds of the World](#).

Email exchange with Samuel Vassallo, Wildlife Refuge Biologist, Sevilleta NWR, May 18, 2026.

Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute. [Species Profile: Swainson's Hawk](#).

Wikipedia. [Swainson's Hawk](#).

Sources:



On Guard

Gambel's Quail can often be seen around the Visitor Center. They typically hatch their chicks between May and July. The young stay with their parents for about three to four months. Quail parents constantly communicate with their chicks, issuing soft, low-volume "whoop" or "wit-wut" contact notes to keep their chicks grouped tightly together in the brush, and a soft, rhythmic clicking or clucking sound to point out food items – seeds, or insects – to them. If a predator is spotted, parents will shift to a sharp, rapid "pit-pit" alarm call causing the chicks to instantly freeze, drop low, and blend into the desert surroundings.

A Gambel's Quail keeping watch over her chicks from atop a rock in front of the Visitors Center. (Photo: J. Kopietz)

Bolson Tortoise Release

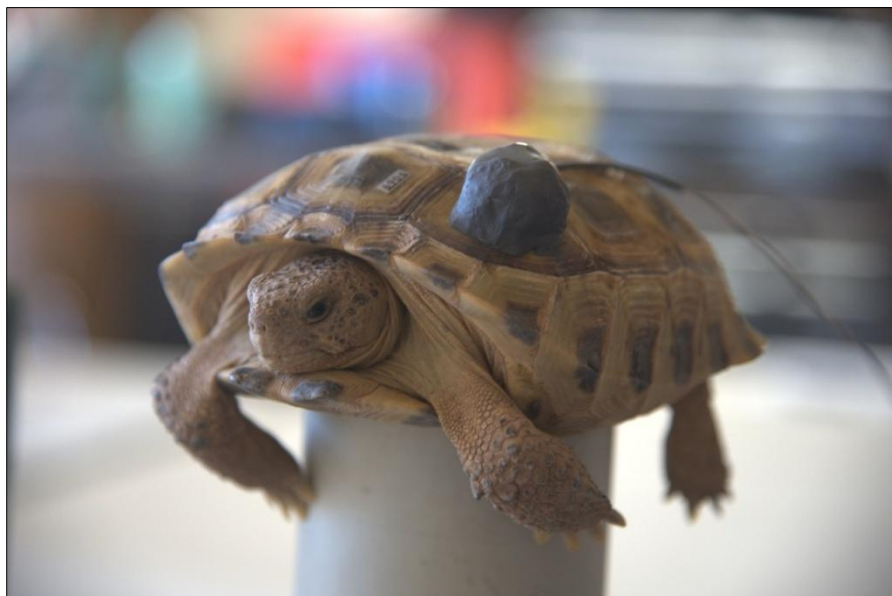
Ethan Hammer, Wildlife Refuge Specialist

On April 22 and May 13, Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge released twenty Bolson tortoises into a soft-release pen on the Refuge—16 on the first date and 4 on the second. Each tortoise was checked for health, fitted with radio trackers, hydrated, and then released. The Refuge now has fifty Bolson tortoises currently within pens throughout the Refuge. The photos shown below were taken by Ethan Hammer, USFWS Wildlife Refuge Specialist at the April release.



Shayla March (Field Biologist, Bosque del Apache NWR) and Samuel Vassallo (Wildlife Refuge Biologist, Sevilleta NWR) perform an initial health assessment on a Bolson tortoise.

A Bolson tortoise sits on a PVC pipe during placement of a radio tag.





Mary Kay Watry, USFWS
Supervisory Biologist, releases a
Bolson tortoise in the pen.



Bolson tortoise walks in front of a creosote bush



Bolson tortoise walking by rose heath towards a burrow (not seen in frame)



Bolson tortoise AW42 heads to a nearby burrow after release.

Drinker Clean-up

A diversity of desert wildlife relies on the natural seeps and springs as well as the human-created drinkers or watering stations on the Refuge. Many are powered by solar pumps to draw groundwater to the surface.

Common large and small mammals seen drinking on motion-activated cameras at the drinkers include elk, mule deer, pronghorn, oryx, cougars (pumas), bobcats, coyotes, black-tailed jackrabbits, and desert cottontails. Avian species like quail and doves, along with various desert reptiles, also utilize them.



Volunteer and Amigos member Dave Lawrence, is cleaning up the Upper Montosa drinker. Chuck Kooshian, Amigos VP, who took the photos, cleaned the solar panels for the drinker pump that day. Thanks to both!

West Mesa Tour

Rye Bailey, Amigos Member

Those who participated (young and old) in the May 26th Behind-the-scenes tour of the Refuge led by Jeff Sanchez, were treated to a delightful experience. We learned about the easements that allow some projects, like SunZia, to install infrastructure on the Refuge. Jeff was very informative about the requirements and limitations of these projects. As Refuge Manager, monitoring these activities and enforcing the regulations is clearly not one of the “fun” parts of the job!

The tour was enriched by the stories and reminiscences provided by longtime volunteer, Mike Chavez.

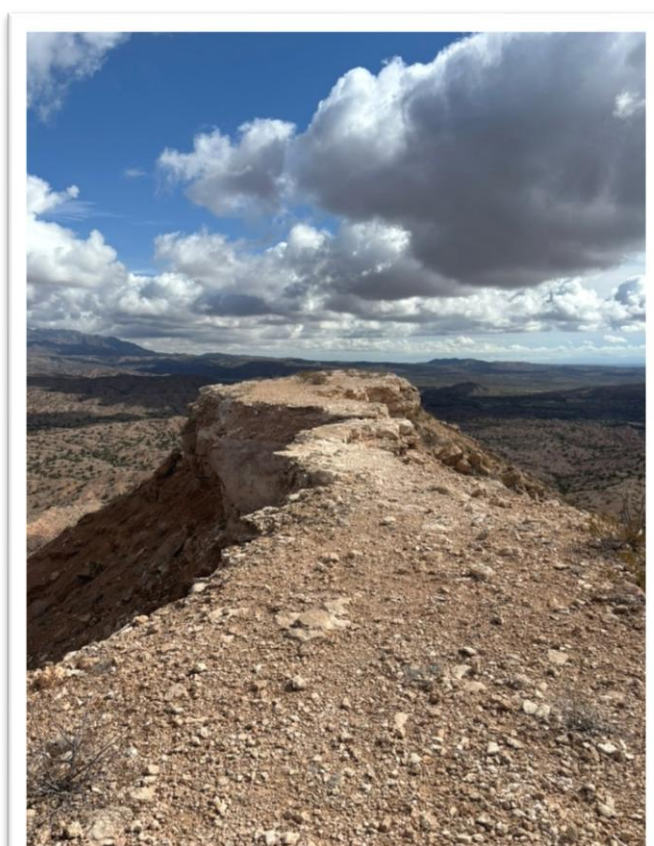
Most of the tour was spent observing and learning about that section of the Refuge. We were treated to views which gave us an idea of the vast scope of the land contained in the Refuge.

The viewpoints were amazing in and of themselves! The opportunity to see some great rock formations and find hidden water sources was a real highlight.

Many thanks to the refuge staff for arranging and implementing this splendid tour.



Photo: R. Bailey



Photos: R. Bailey

Diamond Tour

Joan Koptiez, Amigos President

The week of May 26 – June 1 presented many opportunities for the community to enjoy closed areas of the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge. Sunday May 31st, five of us were guided by Ethan Hammer, Refuge Wildlife Specialist, on the Diamond Tour. This was an opportunity to see sights on the Eastern part of the Refuge that butts up to the Los Pinos Mountains.

First stop was the old Prairie Dog town which seems vacant except for two Burrowing Owls. Following the road south we saw Scaled Quail and three Mule Deer at Nunn Springs. The vistas of Los Pinos Mountains are impressive as we bumped along the road until we stopped for three Pronghorn running in front of the truck.

A quick look at some of the eastside Long-term Ecological Research projects would normally be the end of the Diamond Tour but we had time and kept driving south.

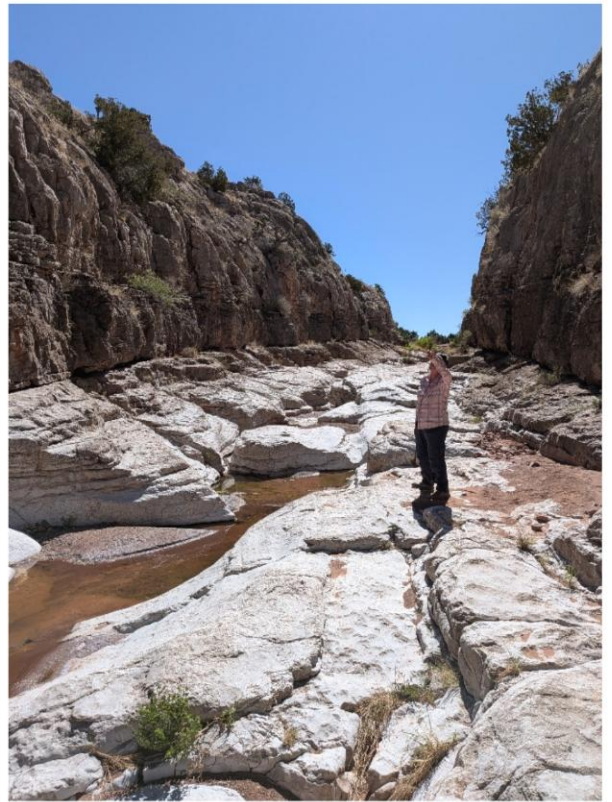
Many of the invasive species revealed their presence on the Sevilleta. Two white feral horses stared at us from atop a cliff as two herds of cows grazed away happily. The surprise at the end of our journey was the thirteen Oryx wandering near the south gate. The group included adults and a number of young.

Our adventure was highlighted by a hike down to Cibola Spring, which though very low in water, was impressive with rock formations.

It was a wonderful day. Thanks to the Sevilleta Staff for sharing their time and knowledge.



Pronghorn and Burrowing Owl (Photos: K. Lane)



Photos:
J. Kopietz



Western
Diamondback
Rattlesnake
(Photo: K. Lance)



Herd of Oryx
(Photo: J. Kopietz)



Burrowing Owls on the Refuge
(Photo: K. Lance)

Contacts

Amigos Website: amigosdelasevilleta.org

Amigos on Facebook: facebook.com/amigossevilleta

Amigos Email: members@amigosdelasevilleta.org

Refuge Website: fws.gov/refuge/sevilleta

Editor's Note

Articles and photographs for consideration in the Amigos newsletter are encouraged.

Please email your submission in Word format to sandybarnett95@gmail.com

The Amigos newsletters are available at amigosdelasevilleta.org/contacts