



CELEBRATION OF CRANES 2023

CINDY JEFFERY

This was our sixth year for the Celebration of Cranes. Despite the draught and depleted water, the cranes came! At least 16 Whooping Cranes were sighted. Fifty-six people registered this year, and they were not disappointed. Our dedicated guides found Whooping cranes, Sandhill Cranes and other birds in the limited areas where there was water. We had eight guides on the loop, and a guide and driver in the two vans. The feedback from participants when they came to lunch and the speakers on Saturday was so wonderful to hear. The weather was great too!

I can't thank all the volunteers enough – they make this event! All of them are not only experienced birders, but from what the participants tell me they are wonderful story tellers too. Making this personal through stories gives people more than the “facts” and hopefully touches them in a lasting way. Our volunteers are from all over Kansas, and our new sanctuary manager Amy Kucera drove all the way

from Hutton in northern Nebraska to pick up a van and be a driver.

An important part of the weekend was registration and check-in to make sure the vans didn't leave anyone and everyone had a map of Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and information about AOK and the refuge. This was handled by Kelley Hurst and Lucia Johnson. They were indispensable – so many details.

Two of this year's speakers had to be “zoomed” in. The lecture hall at Sterling made this possible. The first, Paityn Bower, is from the International Cranes Foundation located in Texas. She gave us updates on the status and research of Whooping Cranes. Did you know the Whooping Crane's trachea is 4 ft. long! She told us that Whooping cranes travel 2,500 miles on their migration, breeding in the Aransas-Wood Buffalo National Park in Alberta, Canada and typically spend their winters on the Texas coast near the Aransas



Observation deck and dry conditions in the Little Salt Marsh.



Native grasses, mud flats, and the blues of sky and salt marsh along the Big Salt Marsh. Photos by Amy Kucera

National Wildlife Refuge in Austwell. This is a narrow corridor and the cranes use 11-12 stopovers. Quivira is one of them. The importance of marshes – fresh and salt – are critical and the Crane Foundation research helps identify areas to protect, in the hopes of expanding their habitat.

Kathleen Kaska lives in Washington state and is the author of “The Man Who Saved the Whooping Cranes: The Robert Porter Allen Story.” As can happen sometimes – things didn’t go as planned. Kathleen was scheduled to speak at 2:00 Central, but the time zone differences played some mischief! She apologized and agreed to zoom with me later to record her presentation. Both speakers’ presentations are now on our YouTube channel.

Her book about Robert Porter Allen is a tribute to his determination and dedication to find the breeding grounds of the Whooping Crane. No one at that time (1950s) knew where they nested. After several failed forays into the Canadian wilderness of Alberta/and the Northwest territory, on a fourth try they found them! It was harrowing at times, flown in by helicopter, camping and the three men lost at times. Kathleen details not only those trips, but also the life of Robert Porter Allen, who had many scary adventures before this one. Kathleen calls him the “Indiana Jones of the Birding World.”

The other two speakers were “local.” Brandon Case represented the Friends of Quivira, and talked about

how they support the wetlands and about the water issues the Wildlife Refuge faces. This is a wonderful organization that supports the Quivira NWR. <https://friendsofquivira.org/>

Dr. Jonathan Conard, from the biology dept of Sterling College spoke to us about how everything is connected in our world, our actions and those of others around the world impact all living things. What we do and how we live have consequences. I wish all of you could have heard him - what a compassionate man, unfortunately I did not record either of these two presentations. (Might have to have him speak again next year.) It is Dr. Conard who has helped us use Sterling College as our center of operation. It is a perfect venue with the added benefit of the College Union’s excellent catering service for our lunch.

We continue this event to educate people on the importance of Quivira National Wildlife Refuge and all wetlands. While Whooping Cranes are back from the edge of extinction, they and many other endangered species are not safe. It is an ongoing mission. One AOK is committed to continue.



Both speakers’ presentations are now on our YouTube channel. Scan with the camera on your smart phone to pull up the video.