

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Partnership Benefits Many

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge Enhances USACE PROSPECT Interpretive Services Field Studies

Nearly five feet tall, Whooping Cranes towered above the smaller Sandhill Cranes. Although heavily outnumbered by hundreds of Sandhill Cranes, the two Whooping Cranes stole the show! As we viewed the amazing avian show from the wildlife observation building, hundreds of waterfowl took advantage of their wintering home, the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. Whooping cranes are the tallest birds in North America. With a wingspan of over 7-feet, they have a distinct appearance due to their snowy white plumage, the crimson head cap and their signature bugling call. One of our country's rarest birds, the endangered species declined to about 20 birds during the 1940's. However, through habitat restoration and dedicated conservationists, the Whooping Crane population has risen to about 600 today. During the winter of 2012-13, twelve Whoopers utilized the refuge along with thousands of geese, ducks and other waterfowl.

The Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, named after Civil War General "Fighting Joe"



Wheeler, is managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The refuge, located near Decatur, Alabama, was established in 1938 under an Executive Order by President Franklin D.

Roosevelt. The order created a 3,500-acre wildlife refuge designed to protect, manage and create habitat for wildlife, fisheries and plants. Wheeler is the first national refuge to be overlain by a multi-purpose hydroelectric reservoir, supporting approximately 30,000 geese and 60,000 ducks. In

addition to waterfowl, Wheeler is home over 100 species of fish, over 290 species of birds, 74 species of reptiles and amphibians and close to 50 species of mammals.

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge is located in close proximity to Huntsville, Alabama. Huntsville has long served as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Learning Center (ULC). It is the center for learning and training for USACE. The facility is under the supervision of Headquarters Directorate of Human Resources. The ULC manages and implements the Proponents-Sponsored Engineer Corps Training (PROSPECT) program, the contents of the famous "Purple Book".

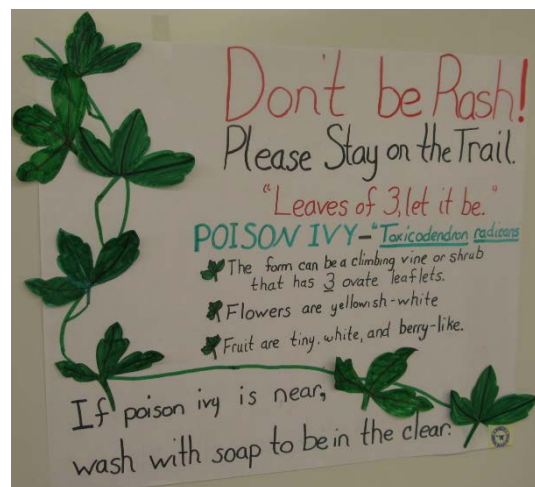
In 2007, Interpretive Services PROSPECT course instructors Pat Barry, Nancy Rodgers, both with USACE, and John Veverka, of John Veverka & Associates, selected the Wheeler Refuge as the new home for the Interpretive Services field excursion studies. The 10-year partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has been a tremendous success and still flourishes today.

Pat Barry, Certified Interpretive Trainer and Lead Instructor, Interpretive Services 2001 -2015, proclaimed, *“Interpretive Services needed a new field trip location near Huntsville. For several years we used the Earlyworks Children’s History Museum and Alabama Constitution Village, but they did not resemble facilities at most Corps sites. The nearest Corps sites were too many hours away. Corps instructor Nancy Rogers found the nearby Wheeler Wildlife Refuge and it turned out to be a perfect fit. Facilities included a visitor center, basic self-guided trails, a classroom, theater, wayside displays, and the best bird observation building I’ve ever seen. The best part, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Rangers Teresa Adams and Daphne Moland welcomed us and fit us into their busy schedules. Without fail, they met with every class, made students feel welcome and, at the end of the day, helped provide feedback on the student’s products. It turned out to be a great place for our students to apply what they learned in the classroom and get practical experience in developing interpretive displays before returning to their sites”.*

“We have certainly enjoyed hosting the USACE Interpretive Services field trips over the past 10-years. The students always produce some great interpretive ideas for exhibits and trails. We always hang on to their project ideas in anticipation of upgrading our exhibits in the future. It's a win-win partnership,” stated Teresa Adams, Wheeler Refuge Supervisory Park Ranger.

John Veverka, the Corps contract Interpretive Services instructor for over 20-years, remarked, *“Our relationship with the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge is a win-win for everyone. Our students get to work on real world interpretive planning and design projects. Wheeler has received thousands of dollars in free interpretive consulting services. Everyone wins!”*

Wheeler provides a tremendous setting for Interpretive Services students to get hands-on interpretive planning experience. The learning opportunities gleaned from Wheeler build skill sets that benefit their respective USACE projects throughout the nation. Interpretive practical applications such as theme based learning, nature trail design and visitor center exhibit design are paramount in providing our customers a quality nature based experience. With current climates of budget and manpower constraints, these hurdles are easier to overcome as the students actually design panels that can be adapted for use at their sites. This knowledge saves time and precious funding resources. Wheeler Refuge Park Ranger, Daphne Moland, expressed a similar view, *“The ideas developed during the interpretive workshop allow alternative perspectives from professionals from all over the country. The numerous exhibit plans are stored for “Times of Plenty”. When the possibility of updates occur, we will have numerous wonderful interpretive exhibit ideas to choose from!”*



Mock Nature Trail Panel Design

“The Interpretive Services course continues to be a huge success for the USACE Learning Center Training Program. Students again provided excellent feedback for the course to include excitement for the field trip, practical exercises and course presentations. The Interpretive Services course is consistently a bright star in the USACE Learning Center training program” remarked Constance Tiller, Lead Instructional Systems Specialist Course Manager E & C Division.

We all benefit from working together. Common causes are the essential building blocks for all partnerships. Together, we are stronger and the famous quote by Margaret Mead expresses the power of working together, *“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”* This kind of common cause certainly brought the Whooping Crane back from almost certain extinction. With a “failure is not an option” attitude, a group of people bound together by similar mission statements can make a difference! In this case, albeit pales in comparison to the efforts that it took to save an endangered species, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers interpretive partnership is making a difference for the betterment and appreciation of public lands.



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