New Growth and Critters: Spring Has Arrived at the Refuge

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We all know what spring means here at the Refuge: plants start growing, baby critters begin appearing, and exciting new projects can commence.

If you remember from our previous issue of Bluestem News, we were beautifying the boardwalk entry area by planting native grasses and forbs and building a pipe railing at the parking area. With the boardwalk completed and construction area rehabilitated, it was only fitting to have a grand opening. Refuge staff spent time preparing for the ceremony, making a unique “ribbon” to cut and arranging educational activities for the attendees. Pens created by our very own Nature
Center manager provided a special touch. Rob has recently discovered a hobby making pens and other items on his wood lathe. Using scrap pieces of wood left over from constructing the new boardwalk, he spent his days off making special gifts for all who were involved with the boardwalk effort.

With the amount of rain we have been receiving lately, full construction of the slough bridge is still on hold. Unfortunately, the area where a bridge is needed—the area spanning a slough—gets wet and remains wet after it rains. We were able to spend a day with the Natural Guard driving pipe so we could begin the foundation, but we are unable to do any welding when standing in knee-deep water. Once the slough dries out, we will be ready to complete the bridge so we can reopen that section of trail. In the meantime, we decided to finish some projects in the shop. The Refuge crew—Nic and Nick—are building new benches and trail closure gates.

You will continue to see these popping up on trails throughout the Refuge. Not only is the crew working on the benches and gates, they are also building brackets to hold new gate signs. If you are ever locked in, take a close look. The signs will tell you who to call to get out. Also, keep your eyes peeled for new informative signs that will be placed at Lone Point and Rest-A-While shelters along the Canyon Ridge Trail.

Although the prairie dogs appear to have disappeared from prairie dog town, we are preparing the area for eventual reintroduction by restoring a more natural habitat. The crew removed invasive woody species and spent a day using the no-till seed drill to plant a native grass mix. Once the grasses are established, the resulting native grass prairie will provide habitat for many prairie species. Another area we are trying to restore to a more natural habitat is what we call
the Greer Island triangle corner. As you head to the Greer Island gate, you will be able to see work being done on the north side of the road at the triangle. We have been using large groups of volunteers to remove our greatest nemesis, the lovely privet, and restore the area to a more natural post oak savannah. So far, two large volunteer groups, Texas A&M’s “The Big Event” group and AmeriCorps, have teamed with our regular Natural Guard volunteers to work in the area.

The old saying “you can’t judge a book by its cover” can apply to the Refuge as well. We want visitors to feel welcome when arriving at our beautiful book titled the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, so the recently built front entry island received a cosmetic facelift thanks to our Natural Guard volunteers. You may have already noticed a slightly elevated front island with some new vegetation and boulders. With a little more rain and patience, we hope the picture on our book’s cover will look as if it’s been painted with a full palette of colors.

A few animals at the Refuge have been receiving some well-deserved attention as well. First, a graduate student from San Angelo State University has been working on his thesis project at the Refuge trying to develop a survey/detection method for the elusive eastern spotted skunk. Volunteers and staff spent three weeks monitoring camera locations (some with an attractant) to detect any resident skunks. We were able to get pictures of a spotted skunk on two separate nights, which was great for both the Refuge and the grad student.
In addition, new bison are making an appearance. April and May are typically the time of year bison start dropping calves; however, our bison herd is unique in that bison calves have been born every month of the year. This year, the bison have reverted to natural habits and have already started having calves. To date, we have three new calves, expanding our numbers to 17 total bison. Although the calves are cute and may appear to want to be petted, it is never a good idea to attempt to pet or feed the bison.

The Refuge staff knows what spring brings: new growth and new critters. We work hard to ensure that you have the best experience possible when you visit and can enjoy the beautiful wildflowers and newest members of the herd. We hope to see you soon hiking the trails or volunteering for one of our Natural Guard groups!