

Coexisting with Wildlife

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The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted how we are able to interact with the public. However, one thing has remained the same: our interaction with the land and wildlife. The critters running around the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge are oblivious to the fact that there is a virus among us that requires masks, closure of the Hardwicke, and limits on hourly visitation. Refuge staff is fortunate that many of the disruptions caused by the virus have had minimal impact on our job responsibilities. We took full advantage of being closed to the public, and I feel our wildlife may have done the same.

It is a known fact that a native population of American alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) resides in and around Lake Worth. For the most part, the alligators tend to stay within the boundaries of the Refuge, although, on occasion, they can be seen in other parts of the lake. From time to time, we hear rumors that they were raised by our staff and released or that we keep them in special areas on the Refuge, but they escape on occasion. Those are simply rumors! Alligators found in Lake Worth and on the Refuge are part of a naturally occurring population, a fact documented in historic newspaper articles. According to these articles, alligators were caught in the Trinity River around Fort Worth in the mid-to-late 1800s. Lake Worth was built in 1914, so this means alligators were observed in this area almost 100 years before the Nature Center was born. Something important to keep in mind is that with any man-made object, whether a house or lake, wildlife will react and adapt. Alligators are still found within the river system, but they are also found in many of the shallow, slow-flowing coves and marshy areas around the entire lake. With a large portion of the Nature Center's boundaries falling within those low-lying, shallow areas, we have optimal habitat for alligators and strive to coexist with them.

Part of coexisting with a wildlife species is learning as much about them as possible. From 2010 to 2011, a graduate student from Texas A&M

University – Commerce conducted a research project in this area to estimate home-range size and assess habitat selection patterns of urban, inland (i.e., Lake Worth) American alligators. Through that study, the Nature Center learned a lot about the alligators inhabiting Lake Worth, but we still have much to learn. An opportunity presented itself in early July when an active alligator nest was discovered on the Refuge. The most recent one was detected almost a decade ago (we do not actively search for



Alligator nests are commonly made from grasses and leaves, and the females tend to stay close to the nest throughout the incubation period. FWNC&R Staff Photo from July 23, 2020.

alligator nests). As with everything we encounter that is abnormal or unique, Refuge staff tries to learn as much as we can. We verified that the nest was active and began monitoring it with multiple game cameras. We documented everything we could about the nest and female alligator to which it belonged. We also collected in-depth data about the nest to replicate an ongoing, long-term alligator nesting project at Brazos Bend State Park. We know very little about the reproductive behavior of the alligators found in Lake



Garrett finds out the hard way that some of the trails can be very slippery. Good luck on your new adventure.... FWNC&R Staff Photo.

Worth and within the Refuge, so monitoring the nest and trying to learn why the female chose her particular nesting location gave us the opportunity to investigate future research opportunities and, potentially, study hatchling survivability, which will help estimate future population.

Another species with which the Nature Center has coexisted for many years is the feral pig. Feral pigs easily adapt to their environment and are, I am sad to say, very smart. The Nature Center has had a trapping and control program in place for almost two decades, and we are constantly modifying our methods and techniques and adapting our strategies to outsmart the pigs. Some days, it feels like I am in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon, playing a cat-and-mouse game. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that our feral pig population will disappear completely, but the more pigs we can trap, the more we can reduce their population, at least for a while. With each new sounder of pigs we encounter from a neighboring property, we must use their behavior patterns to determine if they have ever been introduced to traps. From there, we can decide which methods and techniques will give us the best opportunity of catching the entire sounder. The sounders that have seen—or escaped from—other trapping attempts prove to be the most

difficult to catch. We did not catch our first sounder this year until March. While it is more than likely just a coincidence, it wasn't until the property shut the gates due to the pandemic that pigs became more prevalent. Perhaps the pigs have grown to respect our visitors and are keeping their distance, but with no visitors during the COVID-19 closure, they literally came out of the woodwork. The more likely scenario, however, is that spring was in the air, and we all know that is a prime time to see more critters throughout the Refuge, especially family groups. Despite our trapping efforts, pigs still roam the property, and we continuously monitor their movements trying to stay one step ahead of them.

Like the feral pig population, our staff tends to come and go over time. We fill our natural resource technician positions with hard-working, motivated individuals who grow professionally during their time at the Nature Center but leave to explore new challenges. These positions are very diverse, providing ample opportunities to learn a multitude of skills and gain experience in the natural resource management profession. You may recall last year when we introduced Garrett Fannin as one of our new technicians. He had just graduated from West Texas A&M University with a degree in wildlife biology and was eager to begin his career in the natural resource field. Garrett grew up in the north part of Houston, where the majority of his family still resides. Garrett recently decided that he had been away too long and accepted a position with Universal Forest Products that will land him closer to his family. We had to say farewell to Garrett in August but wish the best for him and his young family as they embark on their new adventures.

No matter what life throws our way, I feel it is important to find the silver lining in everything we encounter. At the Nature Center, we take the lemons that are thrown at us and try to make lemonade. We find ways to learn more about different species and continue to move forward in the natural resource profession. Although it is sad when employees leave, we embrace the opportunity to provide a place for another individual to grow professionally. We will continue to do our part to provide a safe place for you to visit and enjoy our native flora and fauna.



Feral pigs captured on a game camera on the Refuge in 2014. FWNC&R Staff Photo.