

# Growing Pains

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*Peace and quiet still reign supreme despite growing crowds at the Nature Center. FWNC&R Staff Photo.*

The Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge first implemented an admission fee in April 2006. The existence of a staffed gate, in addition to collecting fees, allowed us to finally tally the number of guests who visit the Refuge. During its first 12 months of operation, the gate tallied 30,331 visitors, a total the staff knew was lower than previous years' attendance. Without prior hard numbers, however, we couldn't prove that attendance was down, but we could sense it. Of course, the initiation of a gate fee was expected to depress attendance for a few years.

By 2009, Refuge attendance had broken the 40,000-visitor barrier, and things seemed a bit more normal around the park. Attendance continued to grow each year and broke the 50,000 mark in 2014. In 2016, we experienced our first month (May) with an attendance of more than 7,000, and in 2017, repeated that milestone with two months (March and May) of greater than 7,000, eventually reaching another milestone—60,000 for the year. March was the highlight of 2018 when we experienced 9,311 visitors who took advantage of fantastic weather and came out in droves.

March 2019 couldn't live up to its predecessor, but the rest of the year smashed six monthly records and an annual attendance record of 64,803. Over the course of the year, staff repeatedly asked, "Where are all these visitors?" because it didn't seem to be any

busier than before.

Two months into 2020, before we had to close the park due to COVID-19 on March 21, we were on pace to draw more than 80,000 visitors for the year. While we noticed the overall uptick in visitation at the gate and in the parking lots, our 3,621 acres—with more than 20 miles of hiking trails—continued to be invitingly devoid of crowds and promote solitude and a connection to nature.

Statistically, we didn't anticipate reaching 80K annual visitors until approximately 2025, so we began efforts to better accommodate such crowds some years ago. In the very near future, we will welcome the addition of an expanded Greer Island parking lot and other amenities, compliments of a Texas Parks & Wildlife Department trail grant and a donation from the Friends of the Fort Worth Nature Center, as well as a new amphitheater and covered seating area adjacent to the boardwalk parking lot, also funded by the Friends, to accommodate an anticipated increase in group visits. In addition, last fall, we implemented a trail counter program to better understand how these visitors are interacting with the Refuge as a whole and to guide our efforts in improving our trail infrastructure.

It's an exciting time to work at—and visit—the Nature Center. Once we reopen, please excuse our growing pains as you venture out to see what promises to be a fantastic wildflower year!