

# Counting People for Conservation

*Haily Summerford, Friends Executive Director*

Thanks to a foundation grant, Friends funding, and Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge staff, a trail counter system currently being installed at the Nature Center will soon allow staff to better manage the Nature Center's trails and achieve a healthier people-to-conservation balance by directing efforts toward high-use areas while leaving lesser-used areas in a more natural state.

The vast majority of the more than 60,000 visitors to the Nature Center annually hike one or more of the 12 named trails that comprise the Nature Center's trail system. Most users do not venture more than .5 mile from their cars, leading to a disparity in the usage each trail or trail segment receives. The available data also indicates that at least two types of hikers visit the Nature Center: those seeking more park-like nature experiences and those seeking more wilderness-like interactions with nature.

To date, trail management at the Nature Center has consisted of a monthly maintenance routine of mowing and pruning the entire trail system, resulting in a similar experience for visitors regardless of the trail's location. Trail maintenance also impacts wildlife populations and plant communities since high-use trails suffer from soil compaction and alteration of the vegetative community.

By learning which trails and trail segments receive the most use, staff will be able to modify maintenance protocols to spend increased effort on the most-used areas, providing a more manicured nature experience for those who desire it, while spending less effort on the trails receiving the least use, resulting in a more primitive wilderness-like experience for those seeking it.

Installation of the infrared trail counter system in strategic locations along the trail system is currently underway. In addition to 35



*If you pass one of these boxes on the trail, you have been counted! FWNC&R Staff Photo.*

trail counters being installed, the system will permit data collection in the field and include software to manage and analyze vast amounts of data. This data will help identify the areas that receive the greatest use and most impact. Trail management protocols can then be improved to widen



*Nature Center staff welding the trail counter box to the pipe. FWNC&R Staff Photo.*

high-use trails to accommodate larger groups, manage noxious plants, etc., improving the user experience. Low-use areas would not be maintained as vigorously, improving that user's experience as well. Trail-use data will also guide the development of new trails to relieve pressure on high-use trails.

Through trail data, Nature Center staff will ultimately be able to develop a greater understanding of how the Refuge is used and direct necessary efforts toward lessening or mitigating impacts through proactive trail management. Lacking this data, trail management would simply be reactive, based on routine and perception. With this new trail counter system, effective trail management will positively impact the visitor experience as well as increase conservation of the Nature Center's natural resources. Stay tuned for updates on this project in future issues of *Bluestem News*.