

Magic in the Air at Whitewater Draw

I COME IN THE EARLY MORN, following gravel roads across the empty Chihuahuan Desert grasslands. My dust catches up with me as I turn toward the giant pole barn that takes up the western horizon. From a distance one wouldn't think anything else was here. Getting closer, you wonder if it isn't true.

I pass the little loop of primitive camp spots (empty again), skirt the pit toilets and reach the end of the parking area with its weather-beaten sign-in sheet. I'm always alone at dawn on chilly December mornings. Just the way I like it. Camera and binoculars in hand, I head to the nearest pond, stand dead-still at its rim and gaze. Through my frosty breath I glimpse a bobcat on the distant shore. It slinks into the tawny grass and reappears on a distant knoll, joined by another.

Then, I sit on the frigid ground and wait. Although I've done this many times, it is always new — perched on the cusp of daylight, when light seeps onto landscape

and the mysteries of inky-black waters reveal themselves. In the winter at Whitewater Draw, that means the statuesque forms of sandhill cranes. I smile as I remind myself: I couldn't be alone if I tried.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

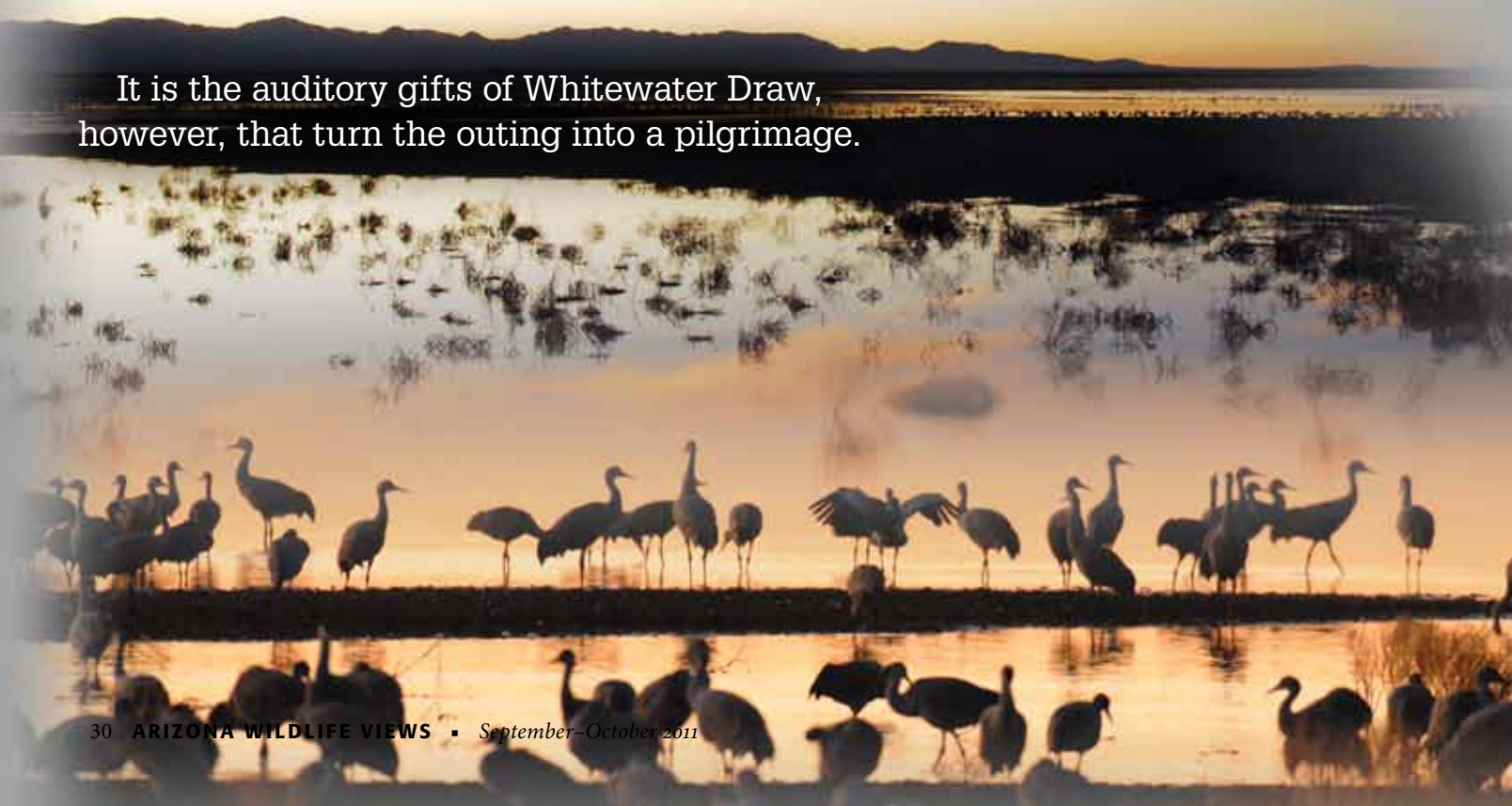
Whitewater Draw defies description. On paper, it consists of 1,688 acres of floodplain and irrigated fields. Located in the Sulphur Springs Valley southwest of Elfrida, Ariz., the area has long been a moist grasslands drainage. Once a working farm, it was purchased by the Arizona Game and Fish Department in 1997.

Any birder knows southern Arizona is ripe with birding hot spots, from hummingbird-rich Ramsey Canyon and the San Pedro's verdant bosque to Portal's trogan-land near Cochise Stronghold. Those are the sexy places, advertised to attract, spruced up and attuned to the needs of wildlife watchers, from devel-

oped trails to birder paraphernalia gift shops. Then there's Whitewater, with little infrastructure, few signs and an old pole barn with weathered picnic tables. And that's the magic. I once held a nature-writing workshop there. We sat on hay bales under the gaze of a great horned owl and talked about how nature informs the written word.

Today's Whitewater Draw is a fascinating mix of grasslands and wetlands. Part of the area is seeded with native grasses, while more than 600 acres is intermittently flooded wetland with two small patches of riparian habitat. It's a management plan that works as I walk at sunrise, witnessing the scarlet flash of a vermilion flycatcher and discerning a long-eared owl roosting in a morass of tangled branches low to the ground. As if possessed, the rushes swell and move with yellow-headed blackbirds. Northern shovelers take silent glides across the pond as a great horned owl sits dead-silent in a nearby willow. It is a scene few

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would believe, including me, if I hadn't experienced it time and time again.

It is the auditory gifts of Whitewater Draw, however, that turn the outing into a pilgrimage. The sandhill cranes stand ghostlike at daybreak, their graceful necks curved as they preen spindly, feathered bodies. Slowly, as if not to interrupt the spreading light, they spread and flap impressive long wings, readying themselves to feed in neighboring fields. You wish it would last forever: The distant Mule Mountains turn blood red with sunrise as the sky fills with wing beats and the crane's haunting, prehistoric calls.

A GOOD PLACE FOR CRANES

Consistent food and water are key to Whitewater's success in attracting sandhill cranes and building their numbers year by year. The cranes move throughout

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the Sulphur Springs Valley during the winter, so a low count at one place may double a few miles away. In general, the crane count for the valley has been above 20,000 per winter since 1998, and they're often right here at Whitewater.

If one could draw the routes of these winged wonders, it would make a mind-boggling visual. Mid-continent cranes have travelled from Whitewater Draw through the famous, centuries-old migration stopover at Nebraska's Platte River Valley on their way to boreal Canada to nest. Some have continued as far as Siberia. A second and larger population, the

Rocky Mountain flock, nests mostly in Wyoming and at Grays Lake, Idaho. This group travels south in the autumn into the San Luis Valley of Colorado and splits into three primary groups that winter in Texas; at Bosque del Apache, New Mexico; and at Whitewater Draw.

When viewing the cranes at Whitewater, it's fun to know the Rocky Mountains cranes fly in smaller family groups, while the mid-continent cranes usually are seen in larger numbers. Mike Rabe, migratory game bird biologist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, says researchers are content with the migratory information they have gathered to date. The birds are no longer banded or fitted with transmitters.

What prompts the majestic sandhills to end their journey in southeastern Arizona is the protection of shallow roosting waters and the food provided by easily

It's a mistake to think the only wildlife at Whitewater Draw is sandhill cranes and the only time to visit is December through February. While those are the best months for watching cranes, Whitewater Draw's natural attractions are available year-round. Below clockwise from left: a great horned owl, viewing platform, vermilion flycatcher, group of pintails and pole barn. Below right: sandhill cranes.



accessed cornfields. Jim Garrett, wildlife area manager of Whitewater Draw, emphasizes that crops change year to year in Sulphur Springs Valley. A large cattle operation in the north end of the valley recently contracted with farmers for hay, which decreased crane-friendly corn production. Corn farmers appreciate the cranes and their kernel cleanup of harvested fields. It prevents volunteer corn from growing the following year. Hay farmers are another story. Cranes are notorious for pulling up the new sprouts. Garrett reports that more farmers now are growing cotton and hay.

Rabe emphasizes that shifts in farming will move the birds, which are very dependent on human agriculture. The cutback on corn, tied to ethanol production, and the increase of cotton, “which nothing eats,” is a troublesome combination.

NO WRONG TURN

There’s no doubt cranes get most of the attention at Whitewater Draw, but hard-core wildlife watchers find joy in

additional wildlife treasures year-round. I’ve seen such stunning scenes as a Cooper’s hawk landing next to a long-eared owl on a log in an area of thickly wooded timber. Spooky-stunning barn owls stare down from cottonwoods as yellow warblers flit and call from emerald-green willow thickets. A scan of my binoculars has detected a bald eagle on a distant fence post. An American golden plover was spotted and verified in May 2009. A casual migrant to Arizona, the bird was especially rare to see at that time of year. Simply put, there is no wrong turn at Whitewater Draw, where nature shows off every few feet with the likes of a mule deer buck silhouetted on a distant dike.

As if mammals and birds weren’t enough to content the soul, Whitewater Draw also is home to various toads and frogs, including the farthest-west population of the Plains leopard frog. From the parking lot, you notice a small fenced area to your right as you face the ponds. This is protected habitat for native frogs, enclosed to fend off nonnative predator

bullfrogs. Leopard frogs are 2–4 inches long and greenish-brown with beautiful spots. Their call is low and gravelly. It reminds me of a rusty kiss. One of Garrett’s favorite stories is when the July monsoons begin at midnight ... how the runoff reaches Whitewater’s ponds from the mountains the next morning and he is awakened by a deafening chorus of frog croaks heard through his bedroom window half a mile away.

LABOR OF LOVE

Garrett is alone in his care of Whitewater Draw, which he has managed for 11 years. He lives in an old farmhouse on the premises where he’s readily available to fix pumps or stretch out underneath a tractor to diagnose a problem. Garrett does it all while meeting the challenge of providing protective water for the cranes to stand in, in the midst of drought. Last winter’s ponds had turned to mud by January, forcing Garrett to pump water for the duration of the winter, a 90 percent increase over normal years. Despite

Wildlife watchers might see a Cooper’s hawk, sandhill crane, yellow warbler, Great Plains toad or flock of cinnamon teal when visiting Whitewater Draw.



the drought, the crane count for the valley hugged 30,000 in 2011, with 23,000 counted at Whitewater.

Cooperative attempts are made at sprucing up Whitewater. A volunteer or two may show up in an RV and help with interpretation during the busier winter months. One University of Arizona student's landscape thesis project targeted Whitewater. It included a new parking area, park benches and boardwalks stretching southward. While I like the few picnic tables and tolerate the interpretive signs that grace the walking paths, I admit to Whitewater Draw development phobia. I like it just the way it is ... where the winged ones rule and the four-leggeds surprise.

DIMMING OF THE DAY

The end of the day at Whitewater Draw brings cranes returning from feeding excursions in wave after wave across the sky. Cinnamon teals, buffleheads and pintails dabble and dive on the ponds as the soft, muddy shore serves up a yellowlegs and a scurrying killdeer. A Northern harrier skims the grass tops of a nearby field. Doldrums of snow geese float on distant waters.

I am poignantly aware of my humble role as witness. I ponder how it is that thousands of cranes descend night after night without mishap. Their return to roosting waters is nothing short of miraculous as they arrive high above and scan the ground for predators. One group suddenly lowers its legs like some kind of comedic landing gear, whereupon they all drop toward the water in a graceful glide.

The scene is noisy for a while as twilight falls. Hearts and wingbeats slow. One is left with empty skies, an occasional squawk and the ubiquitous quack of a mallard. The blackbird-filled rushes cease to move; darkness pervades and a zillion stars glitter above. Then, ever so slowly, the creamsicle-orange full moon peeks like a phantom above the Chiricahua Mountains, bathing this silent refuge in opalesque light. 🦋

■ Author and photographer Christina Nealon can't wait to return to Whitewater Draw this winter. Visit www.christinanealon.com for information on her next workshop, "Writing the Wild."



If You Go

From Tucson: Whitewater Draw Wildlife Area is between Bisbee and Elfrida (just north of Douglas). Take Interstate 10 to Highway 191 (just west of Wilcox) and head south to Elfrida. Take Central Highway and continue south to Davis Road, then turn right (west) for about a mile. At Coffman Road, turn left (south) and go approximately 2.1 miles.

Viewing tips: It is possible to see sandhill cranes throughout the day during winter (until mid-February). Cranes typically take off to feed at first light in agricultural fields in the surrounding area. Early morning and late afternoon are the best time for certain viewing.

Bring binoculars, spotting scopes, cameras and bird field guides. Don't forget warm clothing, especially gloves! Whitewater Draw can be very cold in the morning. A thermos of hot coffee hits the spot!

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