



# THE BOOMER

Quarterly Newsletter

Volume 6 Issue 4

## Message From The President

Friends:

We had an absolutely great Festival this year in spite of the inclement and unseasonably cold weather on the first day.

Most exciting, sixty-two new members joined our organization during the Festival, in order to assist in the effort to save the chicken. I wish to welcome every new member. We appreciate

your commitment.

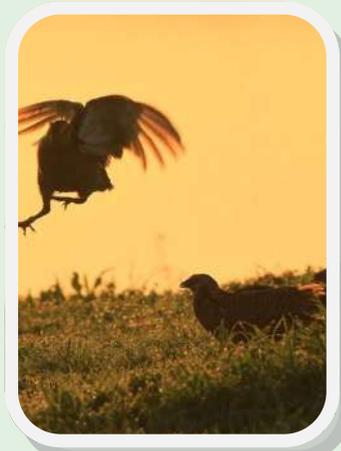
Additionally, we are researching the means and methods that we may employ to expand the Festival to attract a larger and more diverse audience. We hope to be able to feature the Native American Dancers on both days of the Festival and to provide a wider array of games and activities for children.

We are also forming a

board of advisers to assist us with the organization's long-term goals and strategic planning.

If you wish to help save the chicken, the easiest and most effective way is to become a member of the Friends. Please visit our web site and join up.

*Gary Woods , President  
Friends of Attwater  
Prairie Chicken Refuge*



Sunrise action on the springtime prairie

### Inside this issue:

<i>President's Message</i>	1
<i>APC Update</i>	2
<i>Employee Spotlight</i>	3
<i>Art Contest Winners</i>	6
<i>Successful APC Festival</i>	9
<i>New Tax Law</i>	10
<i>Tracking Interns</i>	11

### *Our Mission:*

The mission of the Friends of Attwater Prairie

Chicken Refuge is to support the purpose and objectives of Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR and promote the recovery of the Attwater's prairie chicken and the Texas native coastal prairie ecosystem for this and future generations.

Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge, P.O. Box 212 Eagle Lake, Texas 77434

[www.attwater.org](http://www.attwater.org)

### Did you know?

- Art encourages fine motor skills, neural development and problem solving abilities.
- Art can be used to teach understanding of other key subjects such as reading, writing, math and science.
- The ability to be creative is vital to success of our children and the well-being of our world.

## APC UPDATE

# Down But NOT Out!

Michael E. Morrow, Wildlife Biologist

Attwater Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge

Most of you are probably aware that Attwater's prairie-chickens in the wild have been dealt a series of nasty blows by Mother Nature over the last few years, culminating in the sucker punch delivered by Hurricane Harvey last August. Wild populations were at a more than 20-year high in spring 2016 with an estimated 130 occurring at the refuge (126) and in Goliad County (4). The last time that many Attwater's were in the wild was in 1994. Hopes were high that populations would continue their slow climb, picking up momentum as numbers increased. Then came the Tax Day deluge of 2016 which inundated much of the refuge and surrounding areas. Surprisingly, adults made it through this event pretty well, but most nests on the ground at the time did not fare so well. Continued wet conditions resulted in poor survival of chicks from nests that survived the flood. Conditions during the 2017 nesting season were much better, but unfortunately, we were left with very few birds to take advantage of those conditions. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. In late August, Hurricane Harvey slammed into the Texas coast. Attwater's release sites in Goliad County took a direct hit, with the eye of the storm passing directly over or within a few miles of the release site. That was bad enough, but this slow moving monster took its sweet time meandering over the Texas coast, dumping rainfall amounts expected only once in 1,000 years over much of the Attwater's historic range, according to a [Washington Post article](#). The results were devastating to everything in the storm's path, including Attwater's populations. Of 29 Attwater's with radio transmitters at the Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR before the storm, many of which had just been released in the weeks prior, only 5 survived after. Val Lehmann, an early Attwater's prairie-chicken researcher, reported a comparable reduction of 79–83% in 1967 following Hurricane Beulah, which dropped 16–28 inches of rain (the refuge received nearly 22 inches from Harvey).

For most species, these kinds of disasters would represent the proverbial "nail in the coffin". However, the Attwater's prairie-chicken is extremely fortunate to have a robust captive breeding program to serve as a safety net as we attempt to get wild populations past critically small levels. Typical population growth curves exhibit an initial lag phase as numbers begin to build (Figure 1). **Cont. page 5**

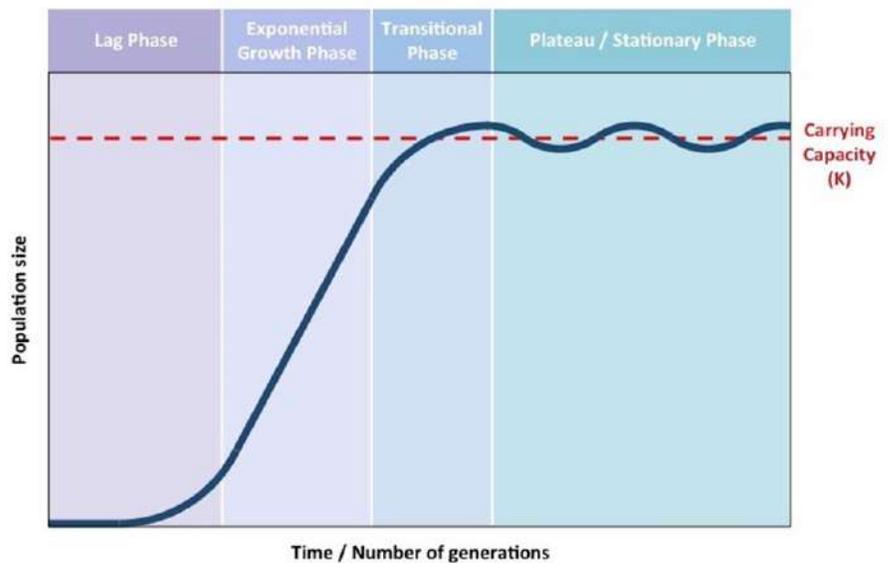


Figure 1. Generalized population growth curve for an animal population



# Employee Spotlight

## Brandon Melton

Wildlife Biologist

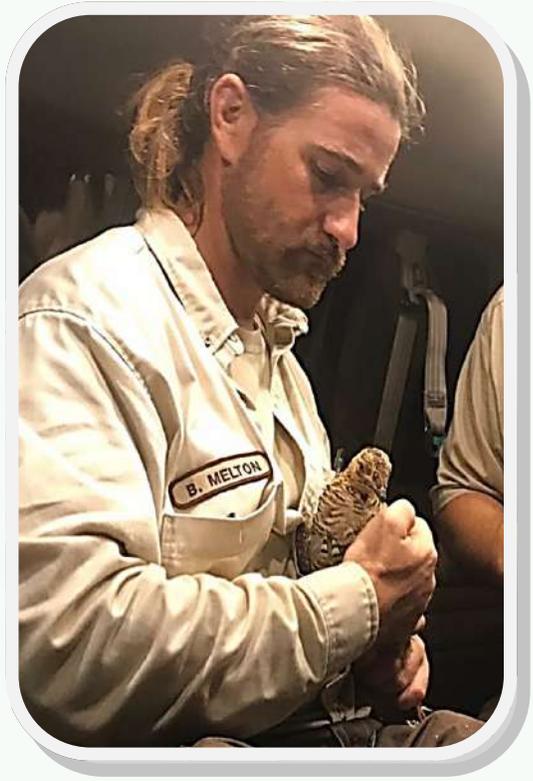
Last Year, wildlife biologist, Brando Melton joined the refuge staff, filling the position previously held by Rebecca Chester. We recently had the opportunity to talk with Brandon about his background, his work at the refuge and his interests when he is not helping to save a species.

**Tell me a little about yourself, educational background, where you are from, how you found your way to the refuge, family.**

I was born and raised in Paris, TX. I joined the United States Marine Corps in 2004 where I was primarily stationed at Camp Lejeune, NC as an armorer (military gunsmith). Through the corps I was also stationed in San Diego, CA; Camp Pendleton, CA; Aberdeen Proving Grounds, MD and was also part of the Iraq war in 2006-2007. I have a biological science degree from Connors State College, Warner, OK, as well as a natural resource ecology and management degree with emphasis in wildlife ecology and management, and fisheries ecology and management from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK. While in college I worked as a biological research technician for the Oklahoma State University Co-op Research Center. At the co-op, I assisted research biologist, PhD/grad students, and partners ranging from Oklahoma Dept. of Wildlife Conservation, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Geologic Survey, and Army Corps of Engineers. Focus species included, Channel catfish, prairie stream fishes, paddlefish, Greater prairie chickens, bob white quail, invasive plant species and Black bear. During this time I was able to apply for a Student Career Experience Program position and was hired on by the USFWS in 2012. Through the FWS I have worked at several national wildlife refuges ranging from Anahuac NWR (Bio Tech), Bitter Lake NWR (Bio Tech) and Havasu NWR (Refuge Biologist), all in region 2.

**Where did you work prior to Attwater?**

I worked at Havasu NWR on the border of AZ and CA along the Colorado River; I was the refuge wildlife biologist there. My work at Havasu NWR consists of protecting threatened and endangered animal species, declining marsh/riparian bird, reptile, and fish species, burned area rehab restoration projects, invasive species removal, waterfowl management, Pacific Coast Flyway wingbee partner, wilderness area monitoring coordinator and the volunteer and friend's group events assistant coordinator.



*Above: Brandon working with the team, at night, capturing brooding APC hens to change out radio collars.*

**Cont. page 4**

**What are your main duties and responsibilities at the refuge?**

I am responsible for the invasive species program here at the refuge. Some key invasive species on the refuge include Red Imported Fire Ants (RIFA), Macartney rose, Chinese tallow, Deep-rooted sedge, Chinaberry, Johnson grass, and feral pigs, etc. I am also focused on restoration and have begun seed collecting efforts to help restore more native grass and forb species to the landscape of the prairie. Assisting recovery efforts for the APC is also a job of mine that can range from research, monitoring, surveys, releases, various partner involvement, and engaging with the captive breeding program as well.

**Have you had unexpected challenges since coming to the refuge and what has been your greatest challenge so far?**

Absolutely! Well for starters, Hurricane Harvey. Anytime you are dealing with an endangered species there is always a list of unexpected challenges that can happen in the blink of an eye. Hurricane Harvey made an appearance right in the middle of the release season. A whole lot of unexpected moving parts had to come together to ensure the continued success for the APC. Although the flooding did take a toll on our birds, we still continue to truck along making this program and refuge better and better every day. Through my short time with the USFWS I have learned that you have to adapt to change and make the best out of whatever unexpected challenging situation is presented to you.

**What are you looking forward to accomplishing at the refuge?**

When one thinks of plant and animal species of Texas, they usually think of bluebonnets, pecan trees, and mockingbirds. But not too many people associate Texas with the endangered Attwater's Prairie Chicken. I would like to help change that mind set in the way people view the coastal prairie. It's one thing to talk about it or to read but when you actually see an APC in its natural habitat; you can see why we chose this line of work. I don't plan on going anywhere anytime soon so I would love to see APC's once again flourish on the refuge and throughout the coastal prairie landscape .

**What do you enjoy about the work you do?**

There is something different every day. The prairie is constantly changing from month to month and the different wildflowers are amazing to see. I like to feel I am helping make a difference in the world. I love that I get to meet new people, work with various agencies, organizations, and partners. We also have a great team here at the refuge and each one of us plays a key role in the management and success of this species and the refuge.

**Do you have any hobbies or interests away from the refuge you would like to share with us?**

I enjoy hunting/ fishing, photography, kayaking, hiking, birding, all types of sports (watching and playing), all types of music especially live music (listening and playing), cooking and gardening.



*Above: Brandon banding ducks on the Texas gulf coast at Anahuac NWR.*

*Cont. page 5*

**What might be something most people would never guess about you?**

I'm not just a long haired hippie or hipster as they call them now days. I am actually growing out my long flowing mane of hair to donate to cancer patients to create wigs for kids with cancer.

**You've held a number of positions in the biological field, including other FWS offices. What interested you in the Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR?**

I am a native Texan and have been trying for years to get back closer to family while also continue working for the USFWS. I have worked with the greater prairie chickens in the tall grass prairies of Oklahoma and have always been intrigued with prairie chickens and how they have survived on the landscape with so many predators and environmental factors against them. I also took this job to be part of a team that can help recover this endangered species.

Populations are particularly vulnerable to catastrophes during this phase because these events can easily push populations over the brink of extinction. Our job, in concert with the safety net of the captive breeding program, and of course with a little help from Mother Nature, is to get Attwater's past this lag phase and into the next phase of exponential growth. We have begun that climb out of the lag phase twice in the last 10 years, only to be knocked back by extreme weather events (Figure 2). In 2012, the population reversal reflected the 2011 record drought. However, it is important to note and keep in mind that the population immediately began growing again after this set back. And it will again after the most recent assaults by Mother Nature. We must also keep in mind that these kinds of sporadic weather events are part of living in coastal Texas.

What is not normal is the critically small nature of remaining Attwater's populations. Unfortunately, it took us far too long to realize that fire ants were a major limiting factor for the Attwater's. But, we now have that knowledge in our "tool chest". The Attwater's has demonstrated the ability for populations to grow, and with the help of the hard working staff at the Caldwell and Houston Zoos, Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, and the Sutton Avian Research Center, we **will** get them past the tipping point where isolated weather events no longer threaten the existence of wild populations. Fossil Rim and Houston have reported producing over 500 Attwater's eggs, each, so far this year, so they are definitely doing their part. Now if we can get Mother Nature to lay off the nastiness for a few years....

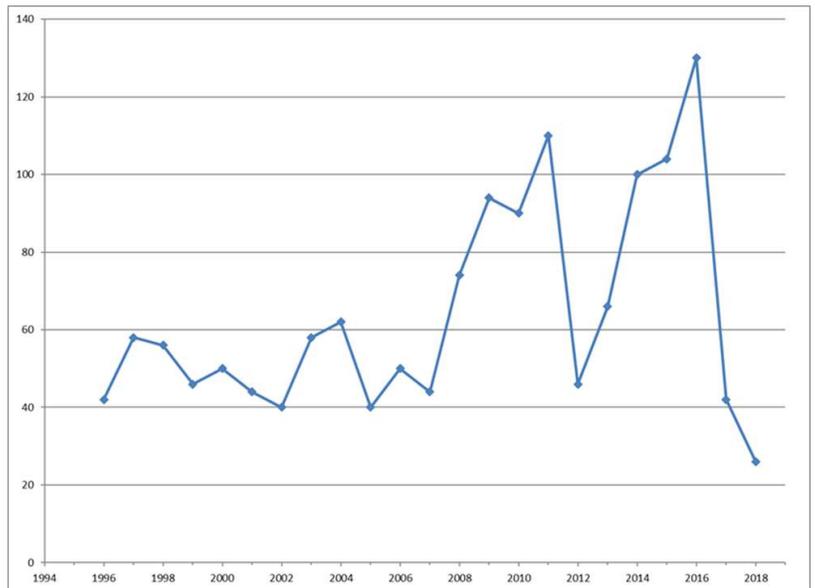


Figure 2. Attwater's prairie-chicken population

# Student Art Contest Winners Announced

The winners of the 6<sup>th</sup> annual Student Festival Art Contest were announced at the Annual Prairie Chicken Festival in April. Entries covering grades K-12, were received from three area school districts. Art committee chair, Sandy Venneman and her committee members awarded the grand prize to Addicyn Kunkel. Addicyn is an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student at Columbus High School in Columbus, Texas. Her art instructor is Jenna Leopold. Addicyn's depiction of a male Attwater's prairie-chicken, "coily looking over his shoulder", earned her a \$250.00 scholarship and a plaque. Her winning artwork also appeared on this year's, very popular, prairie chicken festival tee shirt.

First, second and third place winners were also chosen in 3 categories, Logo (9-12th), Poster (6-8th) and Coloring (k-5th). Winners received a plaque or ribbon and a cash prize of \$50.00, \$25.00 or \$10.00. Honorable mention ribbons were also awarded. All winning artwork was on display in the refuge visitors center during the festival. We want to thank **Blisswood Bed and Breakfast** and board member Carol Davis for once again sponsoring the contest.

LOGO CONTEST	Student	School	Instructor
Grand Prize,	Addicyn Kunkel,	Columbus High School,	Jenna Leopold
First Place,	Sydney De Los Santos,	Brazos High School,	Michael Parthum
Second Place,	Amanda Ricon-Morales,	Brazos High School,	Michael Parthum
Third Place,	Ashlynn Vojtek,	Brazos High School,	Michael Parthum
Hon. Mention,	Amber Sartin,	Columbus High School,	Jenna Leopold
POSTER CONTEST			
First Place,	Salvador Gracia,	Sealy Junior High,	Rebecca Jones,
Second Place,	Susgeiry Saucedo,	Sealy Junior High,	Rebecca Jones
Third Place,	Smantha Gayton,	Sealy Junior High,	Rebecca Jones
Hon.Mention,	Amy Aguado,	Sealy Junior High,	Rebecca Jones
Hon. Mention,	Emma Statham,	Sealy Junior High,	Rebecca Jones
COLORING CONTEST			
First Place,	Maddie Zajicek,	Columbus Elem. School,	Joyce Templeton
Second Place,	Zachery Janik,	Columbus Elem. School,	Joyce Templeton
Third Place,	Joel Rubio,	Columbus Elem. School.	Joyce Templeton
Hon. Mention,	Catherine Bownds,	Columbus Elem.School,	Joyce Templeton

*Right Columbus High School art instructor Jenna Leopold holds Art contest grand prize winner Addicyn Kunkel's winning entry as Addicyn displays the plaque she was presented and a festival tee shirt imprinted with her winning work. John Magera with Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR presents the scholarship certificate.*



**Cont. page 7**

Cont. from page 6 art contest



**At left: From Left, John Magera, Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR and Brazos High School logo contest winners, Asklynn Wojtek, third place, Sydney De Los Santos, first place, Amanda Ricon-Morales, second place, art instructor Michael Parthum**

**At right: From left, art instructor Jenna Leopold and Columbus High School Logo contest winners, Amber Sartin, Honorable mention, Addicyn Kunkel, Grand Prize, John Magera, Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR.**



**At Left: From left, Columbus Elementary School Coloring contest winners, Maddie Zajicek, first place, Zachary Janik, second place, Joel Rubio, Third place, John Magera, Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR**

**At right: Art instructor Rebecca Jones and Sealy Junior High logo contest winners Emma Statham, honorable mention, Susgeirey Saucedo, second place, Salvador Garcia, first place, Amy Aguardo, honorable mention, Smantha Gayton, third place, John Magera, Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR**



Cont. page 8

Cont. from page 7 art contest



Grand prize winning artwork, 6th Annual Student Festival Art contest, by student artist

## Allicyn Kunkel

Photos in this story provided by Sandy Venneman and/or Ramona Ferguson, Banner Press Newspaper

We would like to thank these organization for supporting this year's Attwater's Prairie Chicken Festival.



*"I was taught the way of progress is neither swift nor easy."*

Marie Curie

## 24th Annual Festival a Booming Success

The weather was a little unsettled as the 24th annual prairie chicken festival kicked off on April 14th and as we say in Texas, “just wait a little, it will probably change”. The day started off a little cool and as the day progressed, visitors experienced, wind, sunshine, thunder, lightening, rain and even a little hail. The weather did little to dampen visitors enthusiasm as all who trekked to the booming ground saw a prairie chicken.

Nearly 300 hardy souls visited the festival to view prairie chickens, take refuge tours, and experience guided bird and native plant walks. They were treated to a well received presentation by Mary O. Parker and she signed copies of her new book, Explore Texas—A Nature Travel Guide. The Craig Family of native American dancers performed and regaled the audience with stories from their Blackfoot Confederacy culture.

Visitors from around Texas, across the nation and as far away as the UK, viewed works submitted to the annual student art contest, enjoyed complimentary refreshments, and visited the Friends store for festival merchandise. Hands-on displays were provided by the Houston Zoo and the Master Naturalists. A children’s corner was a success and enjoyed by children young and “old”.

We want to thank everyone that attended and hope to see you again next year, April 13-14 2019, for an even bigger and better event.



*Above: Visitors were given a chance to get up close to one persistent prairie resident at the 2018 prairie chicken festival . Photo by Mandy Bellamy*



*Left : Members of the Friends board got a chance to model their new aprons. Pictured from left, are board members Gary Woods, Jim Hluchan, Ron Jones, Diana Kies, and Eliot Tucker.*

*Photo by Sandy Venneman*

# *The New Tax Law and Charitable Donations*

*Joe Sherfy CPA*

*Member of the Board, Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge*

The Boomer might not be a place you would expect to find a discussion of the new tax law, but changes in the law will make charitable giving for many taxpayers less beneficial. As a result, many charities may experience a decrease in donations.

If you “itemize” on your tax return, then you probably know that your charitable donations have been a “win,win.” You get a deduction on your tax return and your favorite charity, (such as the Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge) uses your donation to help further its charitable goals. Starting in 2018, the new tax law has increased the standard deduction. This means fewer taxpayers will be getting any tax benefit from their donations because fewer will have enough deductions to itemize. Certainly the driving force behind most donations is the benefit to the charity, but it’s nice when it comes with a tax benefit.

But wait, this doesn’t mean all is lost, because a provision in the tax law can provide tax benefits to those who might be able to make less “traditional” donations.

First, if you are 70.5 or older you probably know that each year you have to withdraw a “required minimum distribution” (RMD) from your IRA, but did you know you can instead make a donation of your IRA funds to a qualified charity and get a tax benefit? This is known as a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). It’s a little tricky, but by making a direct contribution to a charity from your IRA you will get to reduce the amount of your RMD distribution that is taxable. So for example, let’s say you are required to take out \$4,000 from your IRA this year. You can direct your IRA administrator to disburse some of these funds to a charity of your choice and this will reduce the amount of the distribution that will be taxable for that year. Note that you are not even limited by the RMD, you can contribute up to \$100,000 this way in any given year.

Now how does someone go about making a QCD? Well, since this tax law has not been around too long, I imagine each financial services firm has a different way of handling QCD’s. I called Vanguard and found out that you can actually request them to cut a check to your charity but then they send the check to you. So it’s up to you to deliver the check to the charity. Not only that, they take no responsibility to ensure that the payment is made to a qualified charity. So it’s up to you to make sure you are donating to a qualified organization. As always, these transactions would be subject to scrutiny by the IRS so Vanguard suggests making a copy of the check before delivering it to the charity. Probably the best advice here is to talk to the IRA experts at your financial services firm to see how they handle QCD’s.

As with any tax law there are exceptions. Not every IRA qualifies for this treatment. Simple IRA’s and SEP IRA’s are not eligible for this treatment. And not every charity qualifies as a recipient. Because the tax law is ever changing, talk to your tax preparer or the firm that handles your IRA. And note that because the proceeds from a ROTH IRA are not taxable, there is no reason to attempt this strategy with a Roth IRA. So while this doesn’t help younger taxpayers, older taxpayers have a way to keeping their “win, win” when it comes to using a Qualified Charitable Distribution. And if this donation is made to the Friends of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge, it will give our feathered friends another reason to dance!



# Meet the “Tracking Interns” ?

Mandy Bellamy and Gareth Litwiler are Attwater Prairie Chicken NWR’s two tracking interns. Mandy joins us from South Carolina. She has her bachelor’s degree in wildlife and fisheries biology from Clemson University. Gareth is from Ohio. He has a bachelor’s degree in biology from Ashland University. They both began serving the refuge through the American Conservation Experience (ACE) AmeriCorps program in August 2016. Gareth started out as an invasive species removal intern, and after a year, accepted the tracking internship.

The main duties of a tracking intern involve monitoring the survival and location of the released Attwater’s prairie chickens via radio telemetry. The majority of the chickens are tracked on the refuge. Some will inevitably fly off refuge property and the trackers will comb the surrounding roads to try to locate the birds. Chickens are tracked with a truck fitted with a large antenna on the roof. The antenna can pick up the frequency signal transmitted from a chicken’s radio collar. When a chicken dies, the radio collar recognizes that the bird has not moved for a period of time and it will put out a mortality signal. The trackers will walk out to retrieve the radio collar using a hand-held antenna called a “yagi,” and collect any remains of the bird. Being able to inspect the bird’s remains is crucial for determining cause of death. Knowing this, the biologists at the refuge can evaluate their management strategy for the chickens and implement changes if necessary.



*Above: Gareth Litwiler monitoring chickens from a tracking truck.*

*Photo by: Mandy Bellamy*

*Cont. page 12*

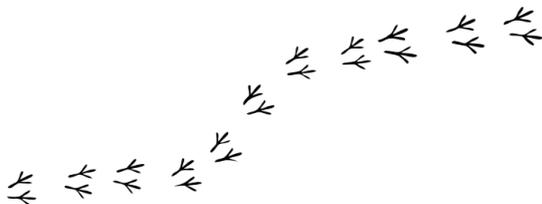


*Cont. from page 11 Tracking Interns*

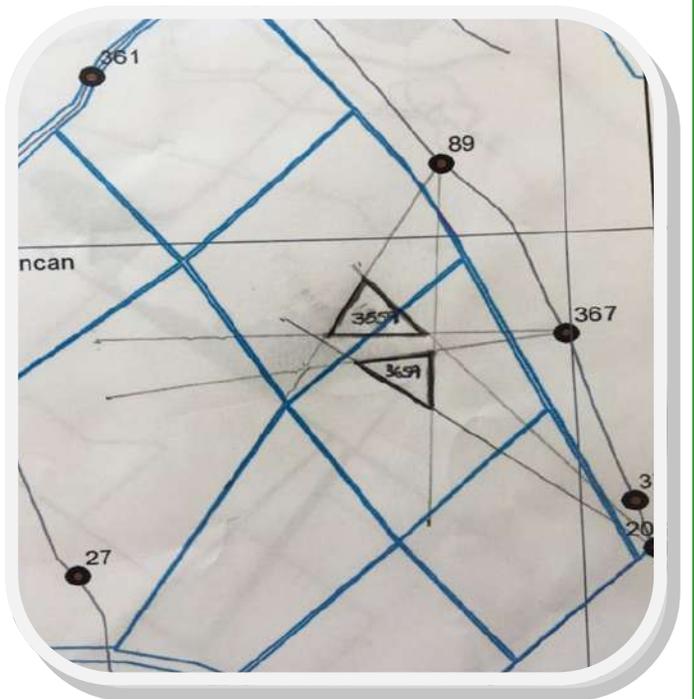
When spring rolls around, tracking prairie chicken hens becomes more involved for the interns. The hens will choose a location to nest and once they have laid all their eggs, they will hold tight to this location. It is important that a predator exclusion fence be placed around the nest before animals such as snakes or skunks destroy the eggs. When the trackers notice a hen is sticking to one location, they will start checking her position from three different points to more accurately determine her location—called “triangulation.” If, after several days, the hen is still at the same position, a fence is placed around the immediate area of the nest. The eggs are measured and weighed to estimate a hatch date. Once the eggs have hatched, the fence is removed so the chicks can wander naturally with the hen. The interns continue to monitor the movements of the hen and her chicks closely. Ideally, later in the summer, these chicks will be captured and fitted with their own radio collars.

Besides their main duties, the tracking interns are very much involved with the surveys and data analyses the biologist staff conduct on the refuge. They have helped conduct surveys of small mammal, fire ant, and insect populations. They have assisted with early morning male chicken booming surveys, bobwhite quail population surveys, and vegetation structure surveys.

Both interns are enjoying their time working at Attwater and agree it has been a very rewarding experience. After leaving the refuge, Gareth plans to pursue his master’s degree in wildlife biology at Clemson University (thanks to Mandy’s persuasion of how great Clemson is). Mandy hopes to find a permanent job, so she can finally settle down with her pets.



*Above: Mandy Bellamy using a yagi antenna and receiver, to walk out to a radio collared chicken. Photo by Gareth Litwiler*



*Above: Triangulation involves acquiring the approximate bearing of a chicken from three locations—creating a triangle when drawn on a map. 3.559 and 3.659 are the radio frequencies of the two hens being monitored on this spring 2018 map.*



## TPWD Magazine Features Captive Breeding Program

The May 2018 issue of Texas Parks and Wildlife Magazine featured a story on the APC captive breeding program. The article, "Born to Boom", was written by Lydia Saldana with photos by Sonja Sommerfeld. The issue may still be available on limited newsstands at bookstores and HEB grocery stores. Most public libraries in Texas are subscribers. It is also available on their web site <https://tpwmagazine.com> but with fewer photos. It is a well written article . Check it out if you get a chance.

# Membership Application

Yes, Please enroll me as a Friend of Attwater Prairie Chicken Refuge

New Membership  -or- Renewal  Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Annual: \$15  Student or  Senior (62 or older), \$20  Individual, \$30  Family

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