

Do We Manage Our Shorebirds?

Shorebirds are those funny little guys that poke into the mud of open mud flat areas with their long bills searching for yummy fly larvae. You know, the sandpipers and phalaropes and stilts and avocets and killdeer? They may stop to dine at Bosque if our mud flats are well populated with blood worms in the spring—roughly the third week of April to the first week of May. That is their migration time table through our area. Their autumnal return is early September.

These birds are amazing in that they have the longest migration path of any species — from the arctic in the north to the south of South America —plus the return trip! There are literally millions of them on our east and west coasts and even at a place half way across the continent called Cheyenne Bottoms in Kansas. But our Rio Grande corridor may host only a few thousand shore birds on the average. They probably don't find enough mud flats with enough blood worms to tell their relatives about.

But do we manage for them at Bosque? There are two answers here — both Yes and No.

Yes, shorebird management is a big consideration in the timing of draw-down for the winter waters in our almost fifty management units at the Bosque. But the whole thing is so complex that it isn't simply a matter of saying, "Hey, shorebird migration time — pull the plug!" And unfortunately not every year can we boast of a fine blood worm buffet, either. It seems that the fly larvae (blood worms) thrive when particular plants decompose in the flooded units,

and some times the units are having a cattail/bulrush year (perennial plants) and sometimes they are having a smartweed/ sprangletop/ millet year (annual plants). Biologists have learned that they do not necessarily control which is which so much as Old Dame Nature herself.

For a brief recap of moist soil management: in each management unit in a period of about three to six years there is a cycle which is naturally established where for the first three years the annual grasses that feed the winter birds flourish; then another period of the same length where there is a mix of annual grasses and perennial plants; and then another period of about the same length that those perennial cattails and bulrushes dominate; this is in all the units. We might mention that all the units are flooded for the wintering birds.

IF that cycle is changed by man by drawing down the waters too early in the natural circuit (hoping perhaps to make some nice mud flats for the shorebird season) Whoa! there is knotgrass growing all over the place (it is a relative to Bermuda grass — ever try to get rid of that one?) Knotgrass prevents the emergence of the desirable annual grasses with its interlacing root system and makes an impenetrable mat that really fouls things up — from natural plant succession to machinery to clean it out! Worse still for our focus is that the knotgrass covers up the mud flats resulting in no habitat for shorebirds, either!

So if it isn't a good year for mud flats here our shorebirds figure it out

pretty fast and either go north several miles to La Joya or Bernardo where there are some juicy ones just waiting. Or maybe they go to Mexico for a good feed. They seem to know how to manage all right — as their numerical success attests!

So — Yes, we manage for the shorebirds at Bosque if at all possible, and No, not every year works out —just like in the rest of Nature!

A few of our "people visitors" were distressed earlier this year thinking that

we were not caring properly for these fine feathered shorebird fowl—which in turn truly distressed our moist soil management people who work so hard to get everything just right. So just in case you were worried about the sandpipers please put your mind at rest and know that actually without the truly conscientious care and management of our water impoundments that we do, all these birds would really be out of luck! Bosque does a great job of-making a "good spread" for all our avian friends.