



# Newsletter

Winter 2025 [www.friendsofwhitfield.org](http://www.friendsofwhitfield.org)

## Winter Tracking at Whitfield Identifying life on the move

Story and pictures on page 3.

Photo © Jeff Sanders

“On the wind in February  
Snowflakes float still,  
Half inclined to turn to rain,  
Nipping, dripping, chill.”  
- Christina Rossetti (1830-94)

## Letter from the President

Greetings Friends!

As I write this missive, it is currently 75 degrees outside. Hardly a normal winter temp. But, hey, that's why I moved to New Mexico.

The Friends of Whitfield organization is very much like nature - a life in transition. And as such it is a good time to express thanks and gratitude.

That said, I'd like to personally thank two board members that are stepping down in February. Frank Mazza and Linda Zaragoza have been FOW volunteers for the past seven years with five of those serving as board members. Frank was our Volunteer Coordinator and Linda our secretary. They have contributed greatly to the sustainability of Whitfield with the time they have so selflessly have given. We appreciate the two of you!

Also, thanks goes out to Javier Sanchez of Estancia for donating over fifty pumpkins for the pumpkin painting contest at our Aldo Leopold Speaker event this past October.

Lastly, I am also stepping down as a board member due to family issues. But I'll remain a volunteer to the Friends of Whitfield in whatever capacity I am needed.

And I leave the board in capable hands - folks that have a passion for the education, restoration and conservation of Whitfield. We accomplished much in my short time there and I am reminded of the words of Dr. Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

And in the words of Quickdraw McGraw, "and don't you forget it!"

Cheers!

Rob Raucci  
President, Friends of Whitfield  
Board of Trustees



## Friends of Whitfield Board of Trustees

### Mission Statement:

*Friends of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Complex (FWWCC) is a non-profit volunteer organization dedicated to supporting the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Complex by promoting habitat restoration, education and conservation.*

*Friends of Whitfield Board Meetings are held the second Saturday of the month, from 10 am to Noon.  
The public is welcomed to attend.*

### FOW Board of Directors

#### Treasurer

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#### Board Member

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#### Board Member

Bob Kipp  
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### Interim VSWCD District Director

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### VSWCD Conservation Manager

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### VSWCD Environmental Education Manager

Jeff Sanders  
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### Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area

is located at 2424 Hwy 47, Belen, NM  
<https://goo.gl/maps/AKxgnLJGgKD3za7t8>

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## Winter Tracking at Whitfield

by Jeff Sanders, VSWCD Environmental Education Manager  
All photos by Jeff Sanders

When our conservation manager, Michelle Dent, decided to take a morning walk around Whitfield after a recent snowfall, I said, "Count me in!" Michelle mentioned there was just the right amount of moisture and accumulation to identify wildlife tracks in the fresh snow. The excitement of getting out in the field didn't stop there; behind me was a digital SLR camera with a long telephoto lens. Jumping at the opportunity to be a novice photographer, I grabbed the camera, and out into the cold we went.

Nature lovers who visit Whitfield regularly are familiar with the main trail and some of the flora and fauna, but can you identify the tracks of some of the wildlife you can't always see? Follow along with us as we take you on a photographic tour of what Michelle and I encountered during a beautiful, brisk winter day. Test your knowledge of Whitfield winter wildlife and find answers at the end of this article.

### Sighting 1:

First, we stopped to check the well behind the maintenance building to see how it was irrigating the three ponds in the Central Wetlands. You'll notice the steam coming from the water. Approximately what



temperature is well water in Belen?

### Sighting 2:

This bird is ubiquitous at Whitfield and has distinct markings on its crown.



### Sighting 3:

You'll assuredly see or hear these graceful birds overhead during the winter months. Their calls are quite memorable once you are familiar.



### Sighting 4:

The telephoto lens was able to zoom in across the Central Wetlands to capture three notably yellow-bellied birds. These are insectivorous grassland birds indicative of a healthy grassland system.

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## Connection Circles

by Teresa de Cherif, VSWCD Board Chair

Thousands of volunteers and enthusiasts made it possible for Whitfield to journey from closed dairy farm to flourishing conservation area in just two decades. Dozens of the volunteers were Friends of Whitfield.

You planted native trees and shrubs, cultivated food crops for migratory birds and a wild-turkey sanctuary, and made a 1-acre pond. Your volunteerism converted 97 acres of overworked and eroded soil to restored and enhanced wetlands in the Middle Rio Grande.

You made a dream of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area a reality and cherished community asset, where thousands of students have experienced hands-on, outdoor science learning. You turned out en masse to offer support after the 2022 Big Hole Fire razed 75 percent of Whitfield. You voted Whitfield the Best Outdoor Recreation site for 2024 in polling conducted by the Valencia County News-Bulletin.

The Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District (VSWCD) recognizes that our partnership with the communities we serve is our North star. The VSWCD is particularly grateful to the Friends of Whitfield who are committed to championing Whitfield's preservation and educational outreach by mobilizing resources and engaging passionate volunteers.

Capacity and funding, however, are still major challenges to the VSWCD, with a staff of four and most revenue generated by a 1/4 mil levy, the smallest soil and water assessment in New Mexico.

Since the COVID pandemic, both the Friends and the VSWCD experienced a downturn in active volunteers.

Building up a volunteer network, diversifying funding and establishing strategic partnerships are key to help meet the capacity challenges of both the VSWCD and the Friends of Whitfield. Over the last year, the VSWCD Board has engaged with "all hands on deck" to diversify funding sources through grants. During that time, the Friends' Board worked for months on revising the bylaws of the Friends of Whitfield, continued fundraising, and hosted several events at Whitfield.

When the Friends of Whitfield organized an annual stargazing on November 21, 2024 — Whitfield Under the

Stars — they almost certainly never considered the predictive power of those words. Our community's beloved nature park, Whitfield, is now truly "under the stars." The stars are the new employees of the Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District.

As some of you know, Michelle Dent is the new conservation program manager for Whitfield and other properties owned or managed by the VSWCD. Jeff Sanders is the new environmental education program manager, who will be welcoming students of all ages back to Whitfield for outdoor hands-on science learning. But, Jeff needs help to overcome some of the growing pains the VSWCD has experienced in the last year. Accordingly, the VSWCD leadership has requested that the new Board of the Friends of Whitfield once again fund an Environmental Education Program Assistant.

On February 4, the Boards of both the VSWCD and the Friends held a joint meeting to improve communication, strengthen cooperation, and increase visitation to and the sustainability of Whitfield. Both Boards approved a Memorandum of Understanding to guide this work.

Recently, I attended the annual meeting of the National Association of Conservation Districts in Salt Lake City. In my view, the best session was Cultivating Today's Volunteer from the District, by Matt Ward, the Chair of the Hudson-Essex-Passaic Soil Conservation District (HEP SCD). Mr. Ward has served on the HEP SCD for 39 years and was recently honored for outstanding service by the New Jersey Association of Conservation Districts.

In Salt Lake City, Mr. Ward talked about the connection circle, a process his District uses to listen, understand, share experiences, and build relationships.

"Time is the ultimate commodity. People will never volunteer their time unless you show you care. How are you engaging people? Listen to them before speaking. Seek to understand before being understood. Recruitment comes later, and through peer-to-peer relationships. Provide a template of desired skill sets for volunteers," suggested Mr. Ward.

Ward also said, "Always ask, 'How are we doing?' Acknowledge people with hand-written notes,

## Volunteer News - Fall/Winter 2025

by Frank Mazza, FOW Volunteer Coordinator

What have the Friends of Whitfield been up to lately? Two very successful events have occurred recently in which the Friends helped with the planning and provided volunteer energy and enthusiasm the day of the event. The first was the Aldo Leopold Celebration in late October. He was an early ecologist, forester, conservationist, and environmentalist who had a deep connection to New Mexico through his employment with the US Forest Service. An entertaining presentation was made on the Candy Cordova Trail by an actor who convincingly portrays Leopold. It was a perfect setting for the audience as the weather was spectacular, cranes were in flight, and yellow aspen leaves were fluttering to the ground. All of us there were treated to something special. Prior to the talk, Friends volunteers assisted youngsters in pumpkin painting with awards being given to the best-looking jack-o-lanterns.

The second event was the annual Whitfield Under the Stars on November 22. The evening started with an owl presentation by Laura McCann, former Education Manager at Whitfield. She is extremely knowledgeable about owls, raptors, and turkey vultures and the youth in attendance, of which there were many, asked great questions.

As for the star and planet gazing, the weather could not have been more perfect. The sky was clear and although the temperature was dipping, there was

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### *Did You RENEW?*

As a member your support directly impacts  
the work we do for the  
Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area.

It's easy to renew or become a new member  
by registering on our secure website at:

<https://friendsofwhitfield.org/become-a-member/>



## Friends Business Sponsors

We couldn't do the work that we do without the support of our members and of course that includes our business sponsors!

Some business sponsors are members of our local community, some have a national presence, but it makes no difference. These businesses believe in supporting our mission to promote the education, restoration and conservation of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area. For that we humbly thank them.

And if you should happen to cross their path, please thank them as well. All of us together, we make Whitfield great!



**DESERT GREENS EQUIPMENT / NEW MEXICO TRACTOR SALES**  
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#### Sighting 5:

As my eyes were focused on the ground for more tracks, this bird was perched in a Russian olive and was telling the world to “drink your teaaaaa”.



#### Sighting 6:

Moving along the berm near the ponds were tracks of a small mammal. You can tell the direction it was headed in as its legs lifted off from the ground.



#### Sighting 7:

As we returned to the trail near the NE Forest, I caught a good shot of this bird sitting alone on a Salt cedar hoping to find some breakfast.



#### Sighting 8:

Entering the NW Forest, we stumbled across these remarkable impressions of the plumage of this bird. Notice the tail drag pattern as it took off out of the



snow. If you still can't identify it, the next photo gives you a clue as to its identity:



## No Mow May

by Liz Aumiller, FOW Board Member

Have you heard of *No Mow May* or wondering what it is?

No Mow May is a campaign that encourages people to not mow their lawns in the month of May – and to mow less during the summer. The reason? To help wildflowers bloom and insects pollinate, because both are in sharp decline. The goal is to let the flowers bloom, within lawns and provide more nectar for pollinators. Simple idea, right?!

It began as a British conservation charity in 2019, called plant life and with much support and success No Mow May has shown an increase with participation in the various locations in the states.

While significant habitat loss in both Britain and North America have occurred over time, every lawn offers the potential to become major sources of nectar, and that means giving plants like clover, dandelions, and self-healing “weeds” the chance to grow and provide nectar for pollinators by choosing not to use the lawnmower during the month of May.

I have been doing this for 2 years now, the first year it had small population of pollinators such as bees and birds, but the 2nd year I did this, the population of both doubled! One morning while outside sipping coffee, I watched nature blossom, bees buzzing, finches landing on and eating dandelions, ladybugs, butterflies/moths getting their breakfast from flowers to flower, along with a topping of bugs, it was beautiful & majestic. And not only did it help the wildlife it helped my lawn, make it thicker, healthier and I didn't have to use a weed killer.

Weeds have a bad reputation but, truth be told, some plants that we say are “weeds” have herbal remedies and I think a-lot of weeds are beautiful in full bloom. So if you'd like to increase the habitat of pollinators to your yard, here is how to join.

Beginning in May leave the lawn unmowed. Wildflowers will begin to pop up and this will give nectar and pollen to honeybees, birds, and bugs. Do not mow them down before they flower.

This food is important to honeybees and all pollinating birds & insects as they need this nourishment for their families to expand in population in the early part of the season.

May is an ideal time to not cut lawns as the grass has not reached the height that it will grow later in the season. I do this a few times during the year, not just in May.

You might not want to do a No Mow May but, provide a prompt to and introduce a wildlife garden idea that is also beneficial for pollinators. I have a section in my garden of wildflowers that is beneficial and beautiful.

Either way, and whatever you decide to do to help these wonderful and beneficial pollinators, know that it's takes just a small part to make a big impact for the future. ♥



("Volunteer," continued from page 5)

no wind. Those in attendance, of which there were in excess of 60, were treated to another memorable event at Whitfield.

Events like these are so important because they give children, parents, and grandparents an experience they share where the natural world takes front stage.

Volunteers help to provide that experience. It doesn't matter that they're usually in the background setting up chairs or tents, parking cars, or making and serving hot chocolate. Their acts, in themselves, are insignificant but it's ever so important that those acts are being done. Those acts help to create the opportunity for something special to happen, for folks to learn that the brightest light in the November sky on November 22 is the planet Venus, or that owl pellets are undigested parts of the owl's meal and are regurgitated through its beak, or that in walking from the parking lot to the visitor center the cranes are calling out a welcome.

A final recent event in which several Friends of Whitfield volunteers participated was the Belen Marsh clean - up day. The importance of this event is that it brought together volunteers from several organizations. Similar

to the event I spoke about in the spring newsletter when 3 organizations came together at Whitfield to plant trees and shrubs in the turkey sanctuary, the clean-up day brought different groups of people together for a common cause. With volunteer numbers down across the country, it will become increasingly important for groups to work together. ♥

## Happy Birthday Friends of Whitfield!



The Friends of Whitfield just celebrated 17 years of existence and their continued supporting of the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area.

The Friends wish to extend their heartfelt thanks to VSWCD Conservation Manager, Michelle Dent for baking this gorgeous, and quite delicious, birthday cake!

("Tracking," continued from page 6)

### Sighting 9:

"I bet we see some predator tracks in the NW Forest," Michelle mentioned. Not to be disappointed, Michelle and I came across these tracks of a predator leading from the bridge to Lagunita. It has black bars on its forelegs and a stubby tail from which it derives its name. Its range extends from southern Canada through the U.S. to Oaxaca, Mexico.



### Sighting 10:



Although not over the snow, the tracks of this common critter were following the muddy southern trail near the Moist Soil Units. These omnivores often exhibit a black mask around their eyes and black rings on their tail.

I hope you enjoyed the tour (and learned something along the way). This is Jeff, the new Education Manager at VSWCD, signing off! ♥

### Answer Key:

1. About 54F
2. White-crowned Sparrow
3. Sandhill Crane
4. Western Meadowlark
5. Spotted Towhee
6. Cottontail
7. Loggerhead Shrike
8. Ring-necked Pheasant
9. Bobcat
10. Raccoon

("Connection," continued from page 5)

not e-mails. Tell folks you really appreciate what they do. You also have to provide an entrance and an exit ramp for volunteers, because of evolving life conditions—we all have those. If you ask your volunteers, 'Is this still meaningful for you,' you are able to formulate succession planning."

The VSWCD Board has pledged to have Board members and staff participate more frequently with you, the Friends of Whitfield. We want to listen, understand, and show we care. We hope our connection circles can help us discover a great deal about one another and the communities we serve. ♥

*Teresa de Cherif is Chair of the Board of the Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District. She recently was appointed to the Board of the new Valencia County Arroyo Flood Control District.*