



# Fish & Wildlife *News*



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# PARTNERSHIPS TO CONSERVE THE LAND



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*Jude Smith manages refuges as part of the landscape and makes sure to involve partners*

## Summer Corrections

On p. 12, a photo caption misidentified a red phalarope.

On p. 17, a story misidentified a Service grantee in Mexico's Arroyo del Tigre riverbed. The grantee is Pronatura Noreste.

On p. 38, a blurb said lions and tigers are not from the same continent. Asiatic lions and tigers both live in India.

*Fish & Wildlife News* regrets the errors. Send corrections to <matthew\_trott@fws.gov>.



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*Science-driven partnership efforts turning the tide for the endangered Wyoming toad*

by TYLER ABBOTT, KIM VINCENT and RYAN MOEHRING



## A Snail's Journey to Recovery / 20

*Service programs, partners join together to save Iowa pleistocene snail*

by LISA MAAS, TAMRA LEWIS and DREW BECKER



## Service Hunters & Anglers / 24



## On the Front Lines / 26

*Service employees that oversee oil and gas activities*

by PEDRO "PETE" RAMIREZ JR.



# ON THE FRONT LINES

by PEDRO "PETE" RAMIREZ JR.

Above: Monique Slaughter checks out a facility in Texas.

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*Six refuge employees oversee all oil and gas activities on National Wildlife Refuge System lands*

The wings of the Northern pintails grip the air as the small flock hurries to get airborne and then flies past an oil well pump jack. An approaching SUV had startled the ducks into flight from the water-filled marsh at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in southeast Texas.

The driver of the SUV, refuge oil and gas specialist Monique Slaughter, skirts the marsh on a refuge road as she inspects the 10 wells on the 34,000-acre refuge. Slaughter is a member of a small cadre of refuge employees tasked with overseeing oil and gas activities on National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) lands. The vast majority of those oil and gas activities take place where the mineral rights are not federally owned but owned by private landowners or companies.

Six NWRS employees work full time as oil and gas specialists on refuges: Slaughter at Texas Chenier Plain Refuges Complex; Barret Fortier at Southeast Louisiana Refuge Complex; Romeo Garcia at Lower Rio Grande Valley NWR in Texas; Billy Leonard at Sabine NWR in Louisiana; Lynnnda Kahn at Kenai NWR in Alaska; and Mary Maddux at Hagerman NWR in Texas.

Three of these oil and gas specialists learned the “ins and outs” of the industry from previous jobs involving oversight of oil and gas environmental impacts or compliance. Fortier grew up in a family that worked in the oil and gas industry. He also worked as a wildlife biologist with an oil and gas service company after completing graduate school. Maddux transferred to the Service from the Bureau of Land Management in Buffalo,

Wyoming, where she worked as a natural resource specialist overseeing oil and gas development in the Powder River Basin. Kahn gained her oil and gas experience working on the Texas Gulf Coast with the Texas General Land Office, followed by a career with a private environmental consulting firm.

Two of the specialists started their professional careers with the oil and gas industry. Slaughter got a small taste while working a short stint with an oil well service company right after graduating college and training as a field engineer. Leonard began working in the oil and gas sector right after he graduated from high school. After working in offshore oil and gas production platforms in the Gulf of Mexico for 25 years, Leonard enrolled in a university to study wildlife biology to do something different and “get away from the oil industry.” Leonard adds, “I envisioned myself working with birds, mist netting, banding, contributing articles to wildlife journals and doing research.” Instead, his midlife career change landed him at Sabine NWR dealing with oil and gas activities on the refuge. His experience working offshore as an electrician, a trade he learned in the Navy, and as a pumper/gauger working on offshore platforms, has proven invaluable to Sabine NWR and the Service.



Billy Leonard inspects an oil and gas production facility at Sabine NWR in Louisiana.



Garcia actually began his Service career working on the eradication of exotic plants on the refuge. “I never thought I would be working on oil and gas projects, but after a couple of years I became aware of the huge oil and gas activity on the refuge complex, which covers four counties. That’s when I decided to get involved.” Garcia says when he started working as an oil and gas specialist, he had to learn a new “language.” He tapped the experience and knowledge of a refuge volunteer, a retiree from the oil and gas industry, to learn as much as he could about oil and gas exploration and production. “I am still learning a lot. Every project is different, so I ask a lot of questions to industry people involved on the project.”

All of the oil and gas specialists also received training through the National Conservation Training Center’s course “Management of Oil and Gas Activities on NWR Lands.”

A typical day for refuge oil and gas specialists depends on the location but usually involves inspections of existing oil and gas production facilities, on-site visits of proposed drilling sites or restoration projects with oil operators or their contractors, or requisite office work. Maddux inspects oil wells at Hagerman NWR every two days and says she covers 15 to 20 sites in a half day. More than three-quarters of the 175 wells on the refuge are active. During inspections the oil and gas specialists look for hazards to wildlife such as exposed oil, leaks, drips and spills as well as opportunities to improve the site for the protection of refuge resources. Recommendations on site improvements are provided to the oil operators.

Invariably, the oil and gas specialists have to respond to oil and brine spills. “The oil operators inform me about spills,” says Maddux. “The reports are usually over the phone, and I ask them what happened, what and how much was spilled, where the spill was and how they are going to clean it up.” She notes that if the pipeline



Mary Maddux checks an abandoned well at Hagerman NWR in Texas.

has a history of past leaks, she tries to persuade the oil operator to replace the line. Corrosion of small diameter pipelines or gathering lines transporting brine is usually the cause of most spills, according to Maddux.

As regional oil and gas specialists, Maddux and Fortier have the added tasks of providing assistance to other refuges with oil and gas activities in their region in addition to overseeing oil and gas activities within their refuges. Most refuges with oil and gas exploration and production do not have full-time oil and gas specialists on their staff and rely on Maddux and Fortier for assistance. Most of that work is done over the phone and through email.

The skills and experience that these oil and gas specialists have accumulated over the years have paid huge dividends for taxpayers, the Service and, most importantly, for the fish and wildlife resources inhabiting the refuges under their care. They work with oil operators to ensure that adverse impacts to refuges are avoided or minimized. The most gratifying aspect of Fortier’s job is “convincing an oil operator that it’s not very difficult or expensive to do the right thing for the betterment of habitat on refuges.”

Leonard points out that restoring oilfield roads and sites makes him feel he is contributing to the health of the planet in a positive way. “When I revisit a former well site and I see emergent marsh with wildlife using the site just as it was before oil and gas development, it’s very rewarding.” That sense of fulfillment is echoed by Garcia, “Every day I get to work out in the field trying to improve, or restore the habitat that was damaged by the footprint of oil and gas development. It takes time for a site to be completely restored, but once I see the vegetation coming back and signs of wildlife using the former well pad, I get a sense of accomplishment.”

No job is without its frustrations and the oil and gas specialist’s job is no different. Kahn says, “There are times when you think you’ve got everything under control and you assume the operator knows what is expected in order to operate on a national wildlife refuge. However, it seems something always comes up where you just shake your head and wonder where the ‘communication train’ ran off the track.” Leonard expresses frustration at “seeing viable wetlands turned into roads, well sites and flowline ditches, and feeling powerless to do anything about it.” Specific policy and regulatory tools are two items on oil and gas specialists’ wish list to help them oversee oil and gas on refuges.

Fortier is hopeful that working with oil operators day to day will build trust and a mutual respect and lead to improved conservation. “We both have jobs to do. I understand the importance of the oil and gas industry to our country’s energy needs and independence. We have proven in many cases that exploration and production can occur with minimal effect on refuge lands, if done right.”

PEDRO “PETE” RAMIREZ JR., Refuge System Environmental Contaminants, Headquarters