

BOSQUE WATCH

OCTOBER 2018

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AGRICULTURE PROGRAM UPDATE

As we shared in the last issue of *Bosque Watch* regarding the agricultural program on Bosque del Apache, the refuge staff is in its second year of conducting all agricultural operations. Seasons one and two have been great. Season two anticipates a bounty of grain corn equal to that of 2017.



2018 Corn Field near North Auto Loop by K. Berry

Approximately 110 acres of conventional grain corn and fifty acres of spring wheat

were planted this year. That 2018 was a tough water year is indisputable. Irrigation flows into the refuge were highly unpredictable at best. This made irrigations extremely tough because the corn crop is irrigated solely off the Socorro main canal. When water delivery was little to none, staff had to rely on groundwater pumped from wells to irrigate corn and spring-wheat fields in preparation for wintering cranes, geese, and waterfowl. Staff was resilient, adaptive, and determined to be successful in producing high crop yields again. And once again, staff at Bosque del Apache has proven success in the fields. We are conducting corn surveys as we speak, which will give us total production. A “drying” (waiting) period is allowed so that the dough inside the kernels hardens and excess moisture is released, giving us a true dry weight. Corn yield assessment in mid-September put us on track with last year’s production, which means the refuge will have plenty of corn throughout the winter. This much corn will alleviate off-refuge depredation on local and surrounding farms, reducing crop damage in the valley.

It also will allow us to better-manage wintering water birds by providing a reliable, high-carbohydrate food source to maintain optimal body conditions, minimizing stress, avian cholera, and other avifauna diseases.



Photo by K. Berry

In addition to corn, the staff planted approximately forty acres of triticale. Triticale is a hybrid of wheat and rye, first bred in laboratories during the late 19th century. Triticale combines the yield potential and grain quality of wheat with the disease and environmental tolerance of rye. Depending on the cultivar, triticale can more or less resemble either of its parents. It is a high-yielding crop grown mostly for livestock forage as its protein content averages twenty percent. We have observed cranes and geese actively feeding in triticale fields, and they have



Bosque del Apache Sunflowers during summer monsoons by M. Colleen Gino

quickly adapted to this new forage crop. The refuge will continue to plant this additional forage crop as a food source for wildlife management for the foreseeable future.

Fields that are no longer being used to grow crops lie fallow, are self-managed, or have transitioned to moist soil fields. The late summer monsoons drenched the already-parched fallow fields in the farm area. This rainfall produced a flurry of grasses, wildflowers, and sunflowers! The diversity of blooming flora only adds to the beauty of the landscape, making for the uniqueness of the southwestern desert. The self-managed fields are alfalfa that continues to mature. Those alfalfa fields identified for crop rotation were irrigated

and mowed as alfalfa, which is a nitrogen-fixing legume; they will then be put into corn in the next few years. Corn directly benefits from available nitrogen in the soil. Healthy soil means healthy corn crops. Approximately twenty acres of retired farm field were treated as a moist soil field, where plant production varied by seed bank germination. About half of the acreage produced wonderfully, with the remainder in undesirable weeds. As the undesirable weed seed is exhausted, we anticipate that these fields will produce quality annual grass plants that waterfowl queue in on.

The cornfields are located very near the north auto tour loop extension, which will give you visitors, wildlife observers, and photographers extreme opportunities for lasting impressions on your national wildlife refuge.

The Rio Grande is always expected to run extremely low and eventually run dry every summer. As a water user in the Socorro Valley, refuge management must make hard decisions on how much water and land we can truly manage in a given year for our moist soil units and farm lands. This year was no exception. The Rio Grande went dry in March: unheard of. The forecast was bleak. When the irrigation season started, water was diverted into a system of canals and ditches for use throughout the valley, and in the end, Mother Nature came through. Rains came and reflooded the river multiple times. Overall demands on the refuge were met. We still ran short during critical times, but this was the case in the Middle Rio Grande Valley as a whole. We were still able to accomplish set goals and objectives, but there were instances where we had to let a few crop units not receive the full prescription. Some units produced in great abundance and some units produced very little. The refuge is a heterogeneous landscape, so consistent results are sometimes not achievable, although desired; this allows for a diverse and species-rich landscape that provides the unique habitat the refuge is known for. Fall flooding of wetlands and moist-soil units should not be compromised in totality, but we expect some issues and will work tirelessly with the irrigation district and other federal water managers so that we can provide flooded impoundments and provide open water and roost habitat.



Bernard Lujan inspecting corn by K. Berry

SAVE THE DATES



- **NOVEMBER 10: SAVE OUR BOSQUE TASK FORCE, HWY 1 TRASH PICK-UP DAY, 9 AM**
- **NOVEMBER 14-17: 31ST ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF THE CRANES**
- **NOVEMBER 17: WILDLIFEZONE AT FESTIVAL OF THE CRANES**
- **DECEMBER 7: HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE AT BOSQUE DEL APACHE VISITOR CENTER, 4:30-7:30 PM**



Cleaning Up Before Festival – November 10

For the fourth year, Friends of Bosque del Apache and Save Our Bosque Task Force are teaming up to collect trash prior to Festival of the Cranes. We want to make the approach to the refuge along Highways 1 and 380 as clean and welcoming as we can. Please join us at 9:00 am, November 10, on the east side of the Owl Bar in San Antonio. Bring gloves, water, and sturdy shoes. We will provide reflective vests, trash bags, and a limited number of trash tongs for our volunteers. The Friends and Task Force will treat you to lunch following our three hours of work.

Come Enjoy the 31st Annual Festival of the Cranes & Wildlife Zone – November 14-17

Come celebrate the return of sandhill cranes to the Middle Rio Grande Valley. While the cranes are with us from late October through early February each year, Festival affords you the opportunity to choose from 139 unique tours, lectures, and workshops to learn about wildlife here at Bosque del Apache. For details about a few pre-and post-events offered off the refuge (e.g., Abo Ruins, VLA, and White Sands), consult the Festival catalog. Come into the Expo Tent on the refuge plaza starting on Wednesday to chat with optic, photography, and eco-travel exhibitors. At Thursday night's dinner, learn more about sandhill cranes from Anne Lacy, International Crane Foundation crane researcher. Come to our keynote social on Friday night to hear artist Catherine Hamilton present "Amur Falcon Migration." On Saturday, bring the whole family to our Wildlife Zone where admission is free and you can participate in a variety of activities. Get the full scoop and a PDF copy of our catalog at www.festivalofthecranes.com.

Cranes, Candles, Caroling, Cookies, Cocoa and Christmas Shopping – December 7

Join us on Friday, December 7 from 4:30-7:30 PM for our third annual Holiday Open House. Arrive on the refuge in late afternoon to enjoy the spectacle of thousands of cranes, geese, and ducks returning to their roosts. Then, drive to the refuge visitor center for a festive evening. Walk along the luminaria-lined paths between the visitor center and Friends House to enjoy carolers, visit Blue Goose Santa, have a fireside chat with refuge managers, and see illuminated cactus and trees. Tour the historic Friends House where you can also enjoy traditional New Mexican holiday fare. Finally, stroll back to the visitor center to enjoy hot beverages, cookies, and holiday music. Shop for holiday gifts at our Nature Store, where every purchase benefits projects at the refuge you love (and where your purchases will be gift-wrapped for free)!

FRIENDS ANNUAL MEETING



Friends of Bosque del Apache Board and staff welcomed over ninety people to the Friends Annual Meeting on Saturday, September 15. The day started with a bus tour of the refuge, led by Deputy Refuge Manager Bernard Lujan with assistance from refuge staff members Calvin Reaves and Dennis Vicente. During the tour, Bernard showed tour members the very successful crop fields, discussed the ongoing work at the refuge, and answered questions. After the tour, participants enjoyed lunch, accompanied by live music from Jen Exten and a colorful slide show about the Friends' accomplishments over their twenty-five-year tenure. JR Seeger, Friends Board President, opened the business portion of the meeting, which was followed by board elections and keynote speakers Sandra Noll and Erv Nichols, who shared their experiences as wildlife volunteers in their presentation *Birds and Back Roads: What's Over the Next Hill?* The meeting ended with everyone enjoying cake in honor of Friends' 25th birthday.



Cake for Friends 25th Birthday

A brief overview of the presentations and board elections follows. Slides and reports from the annual meeting can be found on our website at <http://www.friendsofthebosque.org/friends-annual-meeting.aspx>.



Gathering of Cranes by Danny Hancock

The Refuge Is Ready for Cranes and Our Other Winter Visitors

Deputy Refuge Manager Bernard Lujan reported that the refuge is ready for the autumn arrival of sandhill cranes and other migratory birds who winter at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. With the refuge staff conducting all farming operations this year, production is expected to be the best it has been in recent years. The refuge staff assumed farming operations last year, and in both 2017 and 2018, have had two of our best crops in many years.

The biology team continues to do a great job managing the wetlands. Bernard shared that Bosque del Apache works closely with the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex (operated by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish) to determine food resources grown specifically for wintering migratory birds as these birds use the Middle Rio Grande Valley for foraging every winter. The goal has been for Bosque del Apache to grow approximately fifty percent of the needed food, with Ladd S. Gordon Complex growing the other fifty percent for sandhill cranes. Bernard also remarked that the refuge saw one of its toughest years ever because of low water supply, with the Rio Grande drying up in March. See the lead article on pages 1-2 of this Bosque Watch to learn more. Bernard also shared that many improvements were made this summer to enhance visitors' enjoyment and safety. The auto tour entry (now called the Scenic Tour Entrance) was paved, and a self-pay fee kiosk that accepts credit cards was installed. Further, to make viewing opportunities safer along New Mexico State Highway 1 at the Wetland Roost, the refuge paved a parking lot (so that visitors should no longer park on the highway or have to walk across the highway in traffic). The refuge plans to install a new steel bridge at the Observation Blind this coming winter.

Friends Report – Let’s Celebrate 25 Years Together!

Executive Director Deb Caldwell thanked members for our twenty-five years of success—the Friends organization was incorporated in November 1993. To celebrate, Friends is distributing a brochure to highlight key accomplishments of the past twenty-five years – *Friends Celebrates 25 Years*. Full presentation slide sets and information about Friends’ accomplishments over twenty-five years are on our website at <http://www.friendsof-bosquedelapache.org/friends-annual-meeting.aspx>, but here are a few highlights of the Friends Report. Deb reported that since October 2017, Friends has raised \$170,000 between memberships and donations—up over \$75,000 from last year at this time. With these generous gifts, Friends was able to support the refuge in many important projects: buying and installing a new steel bridge over the irrigation channel adjacent to the boardwalk; installing another water catchment system and adding more pollinator plants in the Desert Arboretum; funding summer biology interns, school bus transportation to the refuge, and educational programs and events; and upgrading two refuge buildings—the Friends House and the Volunteer Center. Other sources of income are the Nature Store and Festival of the Cranes. The store has expanded its children’s section, and net profits last year were almost \$22,000. Last year’s Festival of the Cranes had 156 events and netted just over \$15,000; this year’s registration is running a bit ahead of last year’s. Festival of the Cranes brings \$3 million in business to Socorro County, with people staying in local hotels, eating at local restaurants, and purchasing goods in local stores.



12,000 pound bridge being unloaded with refuge excavator

Friends Board Treasurer Mary Ruff presented the financial report. At the end of last fiscal year, Friends had total assets of \$563,395, an increase of \$11,555 from the previous fiscal year. Mary explained that a very high percentage of our expenditures (76.6%) goes directly to fund refuge programs.

Board Elections



Board member Jill Buckley, Incoming Board President Jack Lockridge, and Outgoing Board President JR Seeger

Congratulations to new and returning board members! Jack Lockridge was elected president, Lesley Urquhart was re-elected as secretary, and Mary Ruff was re-elected as treasurer, each for a two-year term. Elveta Bishop was re-elected to a three-year term as a director at large. Thanks to JR Seeger, who served one term as board president, and to Jill Buckley, who will rotate off the board after two full terms (including stints as treasurer and vice president). After board elections, the business meeting was adjourned. Biographies for all board members can be found on our website under Annual Meeting and also under the Friends section.

Birds & Back Roads: What's Over the Next Hill?



Erv Nichols and Sandra Noll

Guest speakers for the Friends Annual Meeting, Erv Nichols and Sandra Noll, drew from their ten years of experience as nomadic naturalists to give a beautifully illustrated talk about birds as keystone species. They did so focusing on vital bird-related legislation: the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and the Endangered Species Act (ESA), both administered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

This year marks not only the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Friends, but also the centennial of the MBTA, which many consider the most powerful and important bird-protection law ever passed. The Act's one hundredth anniversary inspired a coalition, including The National Geographic Society, Bird Life International, The Audubon Society, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and 180 others, to join together and declare 2018 as the Year of the Bird and commit to protecting birds and their habitats for the next hundred years.

Each coalition member's website is filled with important information and good ideas for the Year of the Bird. The National Geographic's website, for instance, suggests a bird-friendly action for each month of the year, including a commitment to taking a child

into nature, growing native plants, participating in national bird counts, and making wildlife-thoughtful choices regarding the use of plastics.

Noll and Nichols reviewed a brief history of both Acts: the MBTA originated in response to ladies' fashion and the "plume trade" that decimated egrets and other wading birds in the early 1900s; and the ESA originated in response to DDT, which thinned the eggshells of birds causing populations to plummet, particularly birds at the top of the food chain, such as the peregrine falcon, bald eagle, and osprey. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, told the story of how bird populations were suffering. Many credit Carson (USFWS's first female biologist) with launching the modern environmental movement and influencing passage of the ESA.

The speakers also discussed their exciting work with endangered species--the bald eagle, California condor, northern Aplomado falcon, and whooping crane. They highlighted the northern Aplomado falcon and whooping crane, which have been a focus here at the refuge in the past. They asked audience members to contact their legislators and urge them to lobby to maintain the strength and effectiveness of both the MBTA and the ESA, which are under threat by bills currently in Congress.

They continued with a brief summary of factors that are negatively impacting the Rocky Mountain and Colorado River Valley populations of greater sandhill cranes that overwinter on the refuge, and they emphasized the need for local action protesting the currently proposed location of SunZia transmission lines, which present grave potential for injury and death to the sandhill cranes roosting in the area.

Nichols and Noll concluded with a short video by Brian Nelson (Mother Nature Network) featuring their work with sandhill cranes that overwinter at Bosque del Apache NWR and on the playas near Wilcox, AZ. The seven-minute video is a heartwarming summary of their passion for and commitment to birds. It is posted on the Friends website at the bottom of the home page (<http://www.friendsofbosquedelapache.org/>) and also in the Gallery section, under Videos.

A SUMMER OF LEARNING FOR BIOLOGY INTERNS



With the assistance of the Friends, the biology staff hired three interns this summer. These hard-working students helped with a variety of work, including surveys, data entry, outreach, research, and so much more in their three months at Bosque del Apache. They were instrumental in assisting the biologists with their workload over the summer, and they contributed to the refuge as a whole. However, one of the main goals of hiring interns is to give them experience to better their careers, provide life experiences, and help them in their journey within the field of wildlife biology. So let's hear from them and get their perspectives on their summer internships at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

Having never been to New Mexico or to a national wildlife refuge, this summer was a whirlwind of new learning experiences. I conquered my irrational fear of frogs, learned more about birds than I thought possible, witnessed the hidden beauty of the desert, and loved every minute of it! The valuable skills learned, the network connections made, and my deepening passion for conservation were all signs that told me I was working in the right field. I went from not knowing what the US Fish and Wildlife Service was to full-heartedly supporting it and seeking out a career within the agency. Without the continued help and support of the Friends of Bosque del Apache, this opportunity would have never been possible for me.

--Mady Hill, attending Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas

My internship at Bosque del Apache this summer has given me so many new experiences. Being from Arlington, Virginia, and never having been to New Mexico before really took me out of my comfort zone. I'm glad I pushed myself to move somewhere I'd never been before because I learned so much about conducting fieldwork and wetland management. I have a great appreciation for the work that the refuge staff does here at Bosque del Apache because I have seen first-hand what they have to do on a day-to-day basis. My favorite part about my internship was conducting the southwestern willow flycatcher surveys. I enjoyed walking the refuge on my own as the sun was rising and listening for flycatchers.

-- Gaby Giacomangeli, 2018 graduate of Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia

This summer I had the privilege to experience the wild and unique landscapes of Bosque del Apache and see an incredible diversity of life (much of it up close!). I was able to learn small mammal trapping and handling techniques and to lead a project investigating rodent communities on the Canyon National Recreation Trail, which I enjoyed very much, and which allowed me to learn a ton about the beautiful desert environment surrounding the Rio Grande floodplain. I also greatly value the time spent in solitude during early mornings out on the refuge, listening intently for southwestern willow flycatchers and yellow-billed cuckoos and completing surveys on my observations. These surveys not only introduced me to the world of these endangered birds, but also led to close encounters with elk, peccaries, and even a badger! In addition to all the new techniques I've learned, I've also added 43 bird species, 22 mammals, and 15 herptiles to my respective life lists! My summer at Bosque del Apache allowed me to do and see so much that I've never had the opportunity to experience before.

-- Nate Hooven, Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois



L to R: Gaby, Nate, and Mady
Educating the public about monarch butterflies and invertebrates from the lake at Annual Fishing Day in Ruidoso, NM

DESERT ARBORETUM UPDATE



Summer at Bosque del Apache is quieter and less dramatic than fall and winter, but it is no less important. It is a prime time to focus on plants and pollinators, so we have been busy at the Desert Arboretum, adding a summer helper, expanding the pollinator program, and more.

Dry winters are not uncommon in New Mexico. We always expect the unexpected, but a dry winter has consequences for plants and animals. For plants, the first effect is dramatically less growth and a reduction in spring-time flowering. A second effect is drought stress, which shows up as fewer flowers and leaves, dead plants, and an increase in parasites and diseases. But our Desert Arboretum plants are tough, and they play the long game—hunker down, stop growing, and wait for better days. Now it's August, and the monsoon has arrived again, and the plants are happy, growing and even flowering.

This summer the weary gardeners in the arboretum have been joined by a fresh talent. Readers might know Danielle Gallegos from the Nature Store. During the summer, her hours are cut back, so she has joined us one morning a week. She is learning the Latin names of arboretum plants and how to keep little plants alive in the summer heat.



Desert Zinnia by Wayne Washam

Friends members are aware of the Petschek family's generous dona-

tion for a pollinator program at the refuge, so that our plant diversity can be increased. The donation coincides nicely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Pollinator Program, which specifically aims to increase the number and diversity of flowering-plant species on refuges to stimulate butterfly, bee, and hummingbird populations. This summer we have created four test plots within the arboretum in order to evaluate the obstacles we will need to deal with in propagating wildflowers in larger areas around the headquarters. We tried both planting seeds and buying transplants. Because wildflowers can be very fussy about germinating conditions, I think that we will rely on transplants in the future. We found an excellent supplier: Santa Ana Nursery in Bernalillo on the Santa Ana Pueblo.



Our new plantings are a combination of shrubs and wildflowers, all native to New Mexico and all found on the refuge. Wood's rose, chamisa, Apache plume, winterfat, and wolfberry are all doing well. The wildflowers have a much more mixed record of success. Most of the milkweed, both horsetail and showy, have survived. Other survivors are chocolate flower, Hopi tea, desert four o'clock, evening primrose, and desert zinnia. Success with desert wildflowers is directly related to winter moisture. Last winter we had none, so we had few spring flowers. With our new rain catchment systems, we are able to fill in the gaps between rains.



Desert Four O'Clock by Wayne Washam

The rainwater system for the arboretum is in use and has been helpful. A big part of the Pollinator Program will be more rainwater collection and additional flowering plants. The collector is the north roof of the picnic shelter, and the water will eventually be used on a strip of land on the north side of the shelter. The details and timeline for the project are still being discussed, but the Friends have committed to creating the collection and storage capacity this summer. By mid-August, the rain gutter and first tank were in place and ready to begin storing water.



Apache Plume by Wayne Washam

It's now early September, and the new rainwater tank by the picnic shelter is full. The arboretum is looking very green and lush as all the weeds and late-season grasses have sprouted in profusion. We have had a very good summer, and most new plantings have survived the heat and the rabbits. The biggest lesson that we learned is to wait with new planting until the monsoon arrives. The second lesson is that perhaps the best use for our stored rainwater is as a supplement to the monsoon during the inevitable dry spells.

- Tom Hyden, Friends Member and Volunteer Master Gardener

401 SPECIES OF BIRDS ON BOSQUE DEL APACHE



Cape May warbler by Gary Froehlich

401 species, you say. Is that all the wildlife you can see at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge?

In fact, 401 is the number of bird species that have been seen on the refuge since it was created in 1939.

When I arrived as a resident volunteer at Bosque del Apache in the fall of 2009, the official refuge bird list stood at 370 species. In the next few years, several species new to the checklist were seen, most notably two visitors from South America – the sungrebe in fall 2008 and a rufous-necked wood-rail in July 2013. There were also rumors of more common species that had been seen but were not on the checklist.

In the spring of 2010, a female ruff - a long-distance migrant from the high arctic - was spotted south of

the Dabbler Deck and drew many New Mexico birders for a look. In the birding world there is a phenomenon known as the “Patagonia Picnic Table” effect named after an unlikely but well-known birding area in southern Arizona. It goes like this – when an elusive rare bird shows up, birders will gather and wait for it to put in an appearance. During the hours and sometimes days it takes to see the original bird, other rare birds may also be found as birders are standing around searching and scanning the area constantly. This happened in 2010 when both elegant tern and clapper rail were found by birders waiting on the ruff, as well as a second female ruff – one rare species begot two new ones.

I was asked, and agreed, to take on the task of updating the official checklist for several reasons: I am a birder, I am from New Mexico and know many of the birders who frequent the refuge, and I am a person who likes this kind of a task - one that requires organization, detail and research. The first revision in 2015 upped the number to 385 and the second revision in late 2016 moved it to 397. In addition to new species seen since 2008, those rumored more common missing birds were also found: many had been overlooked in the last update.

As revisions were made, the work-in-progress checklist was handed out to birders to look over and reports surfaced of a Cape May warbler seen on the spring Socorro County count, a great crested flycatcher seen in the cottonwood in front of the visitor center, a photo of a Montezuma quail near the Coyote Deck, and many warblers from a refuge banding project that had taken place over several years in the 1990’s. Each report was tracked down to the original source and the species added to the checklist.

Another valuable resource have been the Field Notes from the New Mexico Ornithological Society (NMOS), both the on-line records going back to the 1970’s as well as the quarterly hard copies I have been receiving since



Roseate Spoonbill by Wayne Washam

the 1990's as a member of NMOS. As each volume was read, more new species were found that had been missed and the list slowly inched upward. New species continued to be found like roseate spoonbill and broad-winged hawk in 2010, Philadelphia vireo and Blackburnian warbler in 2012, blackpoll warbler and hermit warbler in 2013, dusky-capped flycatcher and white-winged scoter in 2015, and gray hawk in 2017 for number 398.

In March 2018, only one new species had been reported since the checklist was last revised in December 2016. My goal was to reach 400 species before I left in August. The New Mexico state checklist currently stands at 538 species but it covers a lot of habitat that doesn't exist on the refuge - no alpine here and there is a mountain range between the Rio Grande and the fabled migrant traps of the eastern plains. The last two species turn out to be old records found by checking the NMOS database for every species

on the New Mexico checklist that is not on the refuge list. On 22 July the official new checklist is given to the typist with 401 species: I have reached my goal.

My thanks to all the birders in the state who have assisted me with their time in reviewing drafts of the checklist and pointing out species they knew had been seen on the refuge. I would not have reached 400 without their help. Thanks also to the Friends of the Bosque del Apache who have typed, formatted and printed all revisions to the checklist since I started doing updates. Many thanks to the refuge for giving me the challenge and the time to work on this project, I have certainly learned a lot about the birds that frequent Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge.

What will species number 402 be?

- Cathie Sandell, USFWS Volunteer



Great Crested Flycatcher by David Kreuper



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YOUR STORY MATTERS!

For more information on sharing your story about Bosque del Apache with decision makers, please contact the Friends at Execdirector@friendsofbosquedelapache.org

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