

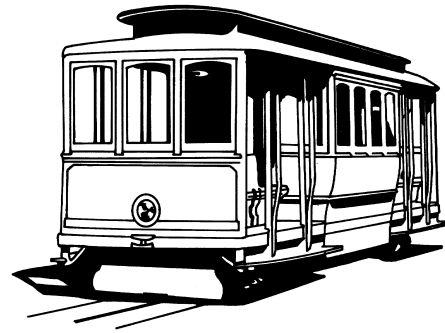
[From Fall 2002]

Refuge Tours a Hit - Trolley Not

From Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend, three tours per day, seven days a week, the CNHA conducted a pilot program which provided nearly 300 interpreter-escorted refuge tours to almost 7,000 visitors. Tours originated from the boat dock parking area behind the lighthouse, traveled up the gravel service road to the North Wash Flats impoundment, and returned to their starting point -- a 15-mile round trip via a "trolley".

The tours were designed to provide visitors with an educational and entertaining program that fostered an understanding of refuge resources, programs and activities and answered questions about the wildlife and ecology of the refuge. Access to this area of the refuge is usually open only to foot traffic, so few visitors trek the length of the long, dusty road.

Thanks to our intrepid and talented refuge volunteers, and the leadership, persistence and perseverance of our CNHA President, Nancy Roberts, the interpretive experience provided to refuge visitors by our volunteers got rave reviews. Unfortunately, the vehicle used for the tours did not!



As I mentioned in our last newsletter, the trolley we ended up with was not what we had planned to use. It was the only vehicle available in mid-April, when we were in a position to enter into a contract for a vehicle and drivers.

Since the tour route travels through areas where you can regularly encounter swarms of insects, and since temperatures in July and August can be pretty brutal, we opted for an air-conditioned vehicle which would provide visitors with some respite from the heat and humidity as well as not exact a toll on the ranks of our volunteers. Well, despite the valiant efforts of our contractor to modify the air conditioning equipment to improve its performance, it was never able to handle the abnormal number of days with 90+ degree air temperatures and the heat load of 30+ passengers. Of course, the fact that the trolley had a black roof and lots of glass didn't help. A smoked vinyl film was added to the windows, but had little effect -- except to obscure viewing of wildlife.

We also had a few "interesting times" -- like when the trolley driver pulled onto the shoulder of the road and got stuck in sand and the passengers had to get out and push. Or the time when the trolley couldn't get through the gate on its return trip because the refuge had given the tour interpreter the wrong key. Or the time that --- never mind, you get the picture.

But, we're not easily deterred. Nor were our visitors, who took this all in stride, were amazingly understanding, and lodged very few complaints. We're planning to do the tours again next year, using the "lessons learned" to significantly improve upon this year's pilot program. Send me your suggestions.

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