

Camp Week 5: June 29 - July 3

Happy Friday Everyone!

This week has been a warm one, but campers have been staying cool by visiting the Texas Wetlands and participating in [International Mud Day](#) activities.

Our first stop was to visit **Sally, the bald eagle**. Campers quickly pointed out two things. The first, that Sally is not actually bald. Instead, the name comes from an older word “balde,” which means white. The second, campers pointed out that Sally has an exhibit that does not have mesh or a barrier to keep her from flying away. Sally, like Liberty the bald eagle in the Children’s Zoo, came to the Zoo with an injured wing. Neither eagle can fly, so their homes reflect that. All of the perching and nesting material connects to the ground, so Sally can easily climb anywhere she wants to go. We hoped we would see her take a swim in her portion of the wetlands, but she seemed more interested in watching everything going on around her.

Next as we moved down the path, we found **Heiden and Angel, the whooping cranes**. These birds are the tallest birds in Texas and North America too! Green camp had fun measuring themselves against the whooping crane measuring stick. It took the entire group of virtual campers to match the height of one crane! The whooping cranes seemed to enjoy having access to the water in their wetland home, but they only stood in their water and did not swim. This mirrored what their wild counterparts will do, as whooping cranes love to wade in the water looking for their favorite food, blue crabs! Heiden and Angel, though, also like to try and catch the frogs that make their way into their exhibit.

The final exhibit in the wetlands is home to **Snap, Crackle, and Pop, the American alligators**. Campers observed their beach and noticed grooves in the sand where the alligator’s tails dragged on the ground as they walked around. When we got to the alligators, two were floating in the water while a third laid on shore. For the two in the water, only their eyes, the top of their head, and their noses were above water. It looked like they were practicing the alligator’s favorite hunting technique. Alligators are ambush hunters, floating and waiting for food to come near. With just a little bit of their bodies sticking out of the water, alligators look like debris or logs floating in the water. When an animal gets too close, CHOMP, it becomes an alligator snack.

After the exhibits, we spent some time walking around the large pond in the middle of the wetlands. Connecting the waterways of all three exhibits, the pond is a true wetland. Our water quality and horticulture teams spent a lot of time when the exhibits were being designed researching the correct types of plants and animals, large and small, that make a functional wetland. These plants and animals were introduced to allow our pond to be a true wetland. That means that the pond performs many functions.

- It provides homes for native species – within a day of filling the pond with water and the correct plants, it was found by many different species of birds, insects, and Gulf Coast toads as well. They use the waterway as a nursery for their babies. We have also recorded 7 different species of bats flying by at dusk to get a drink of water.
- It acts as a sponge during periods of heavy rains. All of the plants in a wetland need water to survive, and a true wetland can take in additional water and use it for additional plant growth.

Wetlands are often found where the groundwater, or water beneath the soil, lies close to the surface. Wetlands can help recharge and restore the groundwater after filtering the water.

- It helps prevent erosion. The roots of all of the plants help hold the soil in place and keep encourage more soil to be deposited as water flows past.

While we sat and observed the wetlands, we saw wild **black-bellied whistling ducks**, all different kinds of **dragonflies, fish**, and a few **toads** too! The campers also really liked looking for sculptures of the different types of animals found in wetlands. The next time you are at the Zoo, how many of these sculptures can you find?

Campers finished the week looking forward to next week's adventures, when we will explore the different ecosystems found in the Natural Encounter's building. Have a great weekend!

- **Mr. Nick and the Camp Zoofari Team**