

National Wildlife Refuge Week  
Special Event Station – K5W  
Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge  
Gautier, Mississippi – October 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
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The adventure began with an email from Bob, K4UEE in early July addressed to the leadership of DX clubs around the country asking for our consideration to activate stations from within National Wildlife Refuges during National Wildlife Refuge Week. As Bob described, this was part of an ongoing effort by the KP1-5 Project to establish a long-term partnership between amateur radio and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. I reviewed the resources provided on the web site established by the KP1-5 organizers of the event (<http://nwrweek-radio.info>) and found lots of useful information, including confirmation of what I had already suspected; that we would need to obtain permission from the refuge to setup and operate. Since the Magnolia DX Association already had a good working relationship with the National Park Service through our activations of IOTA stations from Mississippi Barrier Islands, Cat Island - K5C in 2002 and 2003 and East Ship Island - K5S in 2008, this event seemed a natural. Cat and Ship Islands are two of a series of barrier islands that sit about 10 miles south of the MS coastline in the Gulf of Mexico and are part of the Gulf Islands National Seashore, administered by the National Park Service. All three of our activations had required a Special Use Permit (SUP) to allow overnight camping and setup of amateur radio stations, making us familiar with the process. I brought up the idea at our July Board of Directors meeting and it was approved as a club function. I volunteered to lead the effort and immediately enlisted the assistance of Glenn, K2FF to help me get the ball rolling. Glenn had been responsible for coordinating with the NPS on our IOTA SUPs and I knew that he could point me in the right direction quickly.

First order of business was to find and select a wildlife refuge somewhere along the MS Gulf Coast to operate from. I wanted something relatively close to my QTH and a majority of MDXA members. A quick Google search discovered two NWRs listed along the coast, the Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR and Grand Bay NWR. Both were located in Jackson County in southeastern MS. A little more research determined that Grand Bay NWR was undergoing major renovations and wasn't going to officially reopen until November of 2009. So, we narrowed our focus to the MS Sandhill Crane NWR. K2FF and I decided to take a ride out to the Sandhill Crane NWR after work one Friday afternoon in late July and scout for potential operating locations and to see if we could setup a meeting with the refuge manager to discuss our proposal. As it turned out, refuge manager Ted Rentmeister was in his office and was kind enough to make time to speak to us that day. We explained who we were and the idea of amateur radio being a part of NWR Week. We shared a lot of the information from the NWR Week Amateur Radio web site with him. He promised to review it and get back with us on next steps for the SUP. A few days later I had an email from Ted indicating he had reviewed what we had left for him and he thought it sounded like a good project and in keeping with the charter of the NWR program. He provided the information we would need to submit to support processing of our SUP and assigned one of his rangers, Doug Hunt to work with us. Since all was sounding

very positive, I began the next steps of identifying station components and preparing our SUP submittal.

From the beginning I envisioned this as a low-keyed, single station, daylight only activity. I knew that the refuge would not be able to support something on the scale of our 4 day, 3 night 2008 activation of K5S/K5Z from East Ship Island (<http://www.k5s-na082.com>) with our 4 operating positions, 40m 4-Square, 2 x 2 element SteppIR yagis and various verticals, nor were any of us in the club ready to take on something of that scale at this time. So, I set out putting the components together for one small station. I wanted this to be something that I could setup each morning and take down each afternoon by myself if necessary. At this point I was going on the assumption what we would be providing our own power. K2FF has 2 Honda EU-2000i 2KW ultra-quiet generators and I knew that one of these would be perfect for our needs so I asked if we could use one and he of course, agreed. Next up was the rig. This was a no brainer.... My Yaesu FT-920 is a veteran of several MDXA Field Days and IOTA activations. It is also a hurricane Katrina survivor. When my QTH was flooded during Katrina the 920 was totally submerged by flood waters. I was able to get to it the next day and spent the next several weeks rinsing out the brackish water, cleaning everything and drying. Amazingly enough, when I got the courage to reapply power, it worked fine and hasn't missed a beat since. Next was the antenna. I wanted something that would be easy to deploy, not intrusive to the refuge habitat, multi-band and a good performer. I was just about to settle on another trusted old friend, the Carolina Windom 80, when I came across some references to the Buckmaster Off Center Fed (OCF) 7 band dipole. I studied the information on the Buckmaster web site about the antenna and was intrigued that a single dipole antenna could be naturally resonant on 80, 40, 20, 17, 12, 10 and 6M without a tuner. I posted a question to the MDXA reflector asking if anyone was familiar with the antenna and/or had any first-hand experience using one. I received very useful insight from Pat, W5THT, one of our resident antenna gurus about the pros and cons. Bottom line; he recommended it for my intended use. The deal was sealed when Glen, K4GSG said he had one and used it regularly. I spoke to Glen about it at length and decided to order one myself. I received it a week or so later and testing at my QTH was very encouraging. As advertised the antenna loaded without a tuner on all 7 bands (both CW and SSB sub bands) with an SWR of 2:1 or less (mostly less)! A few on-air signal reports from stateside and DX stations confirmed that the antenna was performing well. Our operation would be contained in one of the club's 10'x10' mosquito mesh tents used on our IOTA expeditions and Field Day to protect us from the always present bugs and unpredictable nature of October weather in south MS. Add in support equipment like Heil headset, keyer for CW, and laptop for logging using N1MM logger, folding table and the station was complete!

Having identified the station components I set out to complete the SUP application around the second week of August. I provided a very detailed description of exactly what we would be bringing, when/what we would be doing, how we would be doing it and data sheets on all equipment we proposed using. I also provided some background information on our previous trips to the MS barrier islands and our commitment to ensuring zero impact on the delicate habitats within the refuge. I requested we be allowed to setup and operate during the day on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, 16-18 October. The completed application package was

submitted via snail-mail to the refuge manager Ted Rentmeister on August 12<sup>th</sup> with an email follow-up. Ted confirmed receipt of the application and said we would be hearing from them soon. The first week of September I received an email from ranger Doug Hunt saying everything was falling into place for approval of our SUP. He suggested several options for locations on the refuge to setup our station and even offered to let us attach to commercial power that was available at their volunteer campground. K2FF and I decided to take a run out and pick our final operating location and look over what we would need to get power from the campground to that location. We met with Doug on September 11<sup>th</sup> and found an ideal area very near the refuge visitor center and within 100' of the commercial power source. The location was in a clearing adjacent to the bus parking lot with a few tall Southern Pines that would be perfect to hang our Buckmaster OCF dipole from. Doug approved our location and said he was finalizing our SUP and would have it in the mail to me by Monday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of September. In anticipation of approval I secured special event call sign K5W for our operation from the ARRL VEC web site and began building our own web site (<http://w5ue.net/k5w/>) promoting the K5W event. I also dropped Brad, K4RT (webmaster for the Amateur Radio NWR site) a note letting him know our plans so he could add us to the list of other NWR activations on their web site. Just about 30 days out and everything was looking good! As a bonus, the refuge was planning special activities of their own in conjunction with NWR Week. They were going to be having "Crane Day" on Saturday, 17 October. This was perfect since it would bring in more visitors than normal to the refuge, giving us the opportunity to highlight ham radio to the public. The SUP was received for my signature the week of 14 September. I promptly signed and returned it for final approval and received it back with all appropriate signatures the first week of October. We were "good to go".... Now, all we needed was a little cooperation from Mother Nature.

The week leading up to our event was pretty miserable from a weather standpoint. We had very warm, muggy conditions all week and rain on most days. The weathermen were saying that a cold front would move through by the weekend... I just kept hoping that it would be in time. I focused on things I could control; gathering up all the components and packing them in a large plastic roller container, checking my list to make sure nothing was missing, and touching base with other members who had said they would be helping out. The morning of Friday, 16 October finally arrived. As predicted, a fairly strong cold front had moved through the area in the wee hours of the morning. I woke up at 5:30 hoping to load my truck and meet K2FF at the refuge for 7am. The front hadn't move quite as fast as I had hoped however because there was still a little drizzle in the area. So I gave Glenn a call and told him I was delaying an hour or so to allow the last of the rain to move out. By 7am I was pulling out of my driveway for the hour drive to the refuge. I touched base with Glenn on 2M and also found that Chris, K5MOZ would be joining us. Glenn and Chris beat me to the refuge and were waiting when I arrived. Ranger Doug Hunt also greeted us and made sure we had everything we needed. We unpacked all the gear and started setting up camp. The mesh tent went up pretty quickly with the 3 of us and then we set up the operating table, rig and computer. Within an hour all that was left was to hang the Buckmaster OCF. We selected a nearby pine with a limb sticking out at about 40 ft, perfect.... Now all we needed to do was put a line over the limb and pull the center of the dipole up and stretch out the legs in an inverted V configuration. I borrowed a "wrist rocket" from Charlie, WD5BJT to help with this job. I had watched others use this handy contraption often at Field Day and it seemed

simple enough. Just shoot the lead weight over a limb and pull up a rope sturdy enough to support the dipole. The first shot went over the limb perfectly. Chris retrieved the end of the monofilament line and tied on the rope we would use and I started cranking the Zebco reel to pull the rope over. Well, about halfway up the rope hung on some brush and the fishing line broke... ok, no problem... just reattach a lead weight and shoot it over again.... Well, about 6 shots later I still couldn't catch the limb... Glenn was losing patience and confidence and started looking for something heavy enough for him to hand toss over the limb... He found a deep-well 1 inch socket in the tool box and he grabbed it, tied some nylon cord to it and threw it over the limb... unfortunately, his throwing was better than his tying and the socket came off and went deep into the woods. About this time I finally managed to get the lead weight over the limb again with the wrist rocket. This time we tied a lighter weight nylon cord to the monofilament and pulled that right over. Then we tied the rope to the nylon cord, pulled it over and FINALLY we were pulling up the Buckmaster. We quickly tied off the legs, ran the feedline into our "shack" and started doing our initial checks. A quick run-through of the bands determined the antenna was loading perfectly on all 7 bands. Around 9:45 local time (1445Z) K5W was ready to be QRV and Glenn sat down at the rig and started calling CQ on 20M SSB. It didn't take long for him to get a pretty steady string of stations calling in. Glenn, Chris and I took turns operating for the rest of the morning before being joined by MDXA members David, W5DAW and Darryl, K5CQT. We continued to share operating time working mostly stateside on 20M SSB. During the day a few of the rangers came by to see what we were up to and we enjoyed talking to them about the refuge and telling them about ham radio. Around 4pm local (2100Z) we got a call on 2M from Floyd, N5FG telling us a lot of the local members were wanting to work us but couldn't hear us on 20M. So, we QSYed to 75M and were able to put several members in the log. After working all members who wanted a QSO we decided to wrap up day one on 40M. Glenn got a nice little run going until we finally pulled the plug just before 2200Z. We felt that 125 QSOs for day one was pretty good and were looking forward to the rest of the weekend. Doug made life even easier for us by telling us it would be fine to leave our antenna and tent up all weekend. Perhaps he had watched us hanging the Buckmaster earlier in the morning and took pity.... ☺ So, I packed up the rig and computer and headed home to a nice warm shower and dinner.

I woke up early Saturday to a beautiful morning, even if a bit chilly. It was a cool 45 degrees and no clouds. I knew that I would be without K2FF because he had planned a family trip to Natchez, MS for the annual Hot Air Balloon Festival, but a few other members had said they would be by to help out. I arrived at the refuge around 7:30 and was greeted by Glen, K4GSG. He helped me get the station set back up and we were back on the air before 8. Darryl, K5CQT joined us shortly afterwards and we started logging QSOs again. Doug greeted us early again saying they had donuts in the office and brought the only bad news of the whole weekend. It turns out that there was a construction company on-site doing some renovations and their boss was concerned about liability issues with us being there on Sunday when the refuge was closed and no rangers on-duty. Even though they had approved our SUP for Sunday they were asking our cooperation to shut down Saturday afternoon and not operate on Sunday. Of course we were a little disappointed, but would comply with the request. Determined to not let this put a damper on our event we set out operating and enjoying the beautiful day. About midday the refuge began getting busy with visitors enjoying the special activities for Crane Day. Several

came by our tent and were curious to know what was going on and we were happy to spend time with them talking about the hobby we love so much and our involvement in the community. As it turned out Saturday was also the MDXA fall picnic. I regretted having to miss that event but the K5W event was also important to me. Jerry, N5UCF had said that he would volunteer to setup a station at the picnic and give those in attendance an opportunity to contact us. I thought this sounded like a great idea and would also be an opportunity to make club members at the picnic feel like part of the K5W event and visa versa. Shortly after noon I got a call from Jerry saying several members were waiting to work us, so we QSYed to 75M and worked a string of members from the picnic. Jerry then said there were some who wanted to work us on CW so I moved down to the CW portion of the band and worked several in that mode. Including Jerry, who is taking part in my CW class and he gave me the honor of being his first ever CW contact. The QSOs were interesting on Saturday. During the day we worked a few other Refuge stations and since it was also Boy Scout Jamboree weekend there were a lot of those stations on and several called in and we enjoyed speaking with many of the scouts. About 4pm we decided to call it a weekend and went QRT. The three of us began breaking camp and packing up. Everything was in the truck and we were heading out before 5pm.

We finished the event with about 240 QSOs but success of this event was never going to be measured by QSO counts. We had an opportunity to talk to almost 250 people in 38 states and 4 foreign countries about the Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR and their important work and that of other refuges around the country. Visitors to the refuge on Saturday had a chance to see ham radio in action and for us to talk with them about our hobby and importance to the community. The event was a lot of fun and I am already looking forward to participating again next year. I would like to thank the MDXA members who helped and/or stopped by to visit all weekend... Glenn – K2FF, Chris – K5MOZ, Glen – K4GSG, David – W5DAW, Darryl – K5CQT, Read – W4HOZ, Becky – KD5RHB and Nick – K5BQJ. Also, big thanks to Jerry, N5UCF for setting up a station at the MDXA picnic on Saturday allowing several club members to work us. Finally, I would like to thank all of the good folks at the Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR for making our event possible and providing outstanding support, especially ranger Doug Hunt and refuge managers Ted Rentmeister and Lloyd Culp.