

THE PRAIRIE'S EDGE



FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
www.exploresherburne.org Fall 2011

2011 Crane Watch

Refuge headquarters was abuzz as fifty crane aficionados and six group leaders prepared for the 6:30 AM departure to the western edge of the refuge where 4068 sandhill cranes had been counted by refuge staff two days earlier. The cranes roost in the St. Francis Pool area at night, then fly out to surrounding farm fields to forage and fatten up for their fall migration to Florida. The viewing and listening are spectacular in the morning as flights of cranes depart and at sundown as they return. The unforgettable calls of the sandhill crane invite us to reflect on its origin, millions of years ago, as one of the oldest of existing bird species.



At 9:00 AM the group returned to headquarters, said farewell to a few members and added some new members for the second part of the tour, a venturing forth to observe cranes in the surrounding farm fields where hundreds of cranes could be seen in one view. Observed crane behavior consisted primarily of standing around and looking like cranes. From time-to-time a couple would break into a bit of bond-reinforcing crane dance.



Sandhill cranes are wary. The large size of the our group caused them to avoid flying directly overhead in the morning flights. In the fields they tended to fly farther away as the car caravan approached. Cautiously moving individuals or small groups should have even better viewing than this group.

The parking area for crane viewing is on the south side of CR70, approximately 1/2 mile west of the CR5 and CR70 intersection on the northwest corner of the refuge.



the President's Report

Sue Hix

It was a busy summer at the refuge! You can read about the Wildlife Festival elsewhere in these pages, but here are some other news highlights you'll want to know about.

Tours and Programs

Bird and wildflower tours were again co-sponsored by the refuge and the Friends this summer, but more people than ever turned out for these tours. In addition, butterfly tours and a moth program were offered for the first time and also proved successful.

Student Group Visits

The school year was over, but student visits continued. By helping with transportation costs, the Friends made it possible for several larger groups to visit to learn about the refuge, its wildlife, and its habitats. Groups included the Princeton Tiger Club, a Girl Scout group, and Elk River Environmental Explorers Camp/Zimmerman Club Summer students, who spent 3 "camp" days at the refuge with guidance from many refuge volunteers under the leadership of David Ellis, on loan from Prairie Wetlands Learning Center.

Invasive Earthworm Study

I mentioned in the last issue that we hoped to receive a \$10,000 Nature of Learning Grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to study the effects of earthworms at the refuge. In July we received the good news that we had received the grant. Please see the article elsewhere in this issue for more about earthworm study activities to date—and learn how you, your family and friends, or a student group can participate in this ongoing citizen science project.

Conserving the Future – Wildlife Refuges and the Next Generation

Our Friends group was fortunate to have two representatives attend this 4-day national-level conference held in Madison in July. Along with hundreds of representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, other Friends groups, conservation partners, and interested citizens, we rolled up our sleeves to participate in presentations,

workshops, and facilitated discussions and helped to shape the vision and initiatives for the National Wildlife Refuge System for the next 10 years. Focus areas included Protecting Wildlife and Habitat, A Connected Conservation Constituency, and Leading Conservation into the Future. The high-tech, information-packed sessions combined with "power networking" during every break and the post-conference receptions left us mentally drained and physically exhausted by the end of each day. Despite gloomy budget prospects, we left this impressive conference feeling positive about the future of the refuge system and confident about leadership at both the local and national levels.

National Scenic Byways Conference

"What?!" may be your reaction to this heading. Yes—Scenic Byways. The refuge is close enough to the Mississippi River and the Great River Road to be included in this scenic byway's interpretive plan, so in August refuge manager Anne Sittauer and I spent a couple of days in Minneapolis learning about grants for which the refuge or Friends might qualify. Much depends on what kind of budget is approved by Congress, but we will be ready to apply for a grant for an outdoor classroom or similar facility if funds become available.

Environmental Education Days

This Sherburne County program is made possible by a collaboration including the refuge, the Friends, Sherburne and Benton Soil and Water Conservation Districts, University of MN Extension Service, and the MN DNR. In late September approximately 625 5th and 6th grade students spent half a day at the refuge and the other half at Sand Dunes State Forest learning about watersheds, groundwater, "friendly fire," eagles, soil, forest management, wetlands, sand dunes, fish, and water conservation. This year the refuge played a bigger role than usual by recruiting many volunteer instructors, and the Friends again helped with planning, EE Days funding, and bus transportation for visiting students. Thanks to coordinator Marv Ziner and all the volunteers who made EE Days a success!

Nature's Circles

This women's group continues to meet on the first Sunday of the month; fall/winter meeting time is 3 – 5 PM. The Nov. 6 program will focus on the importance of nature in Native American traditions; the Dec. 4 program will include a holiday celebration and a showing of *Green Fire – Aldo Leopold and a Land Ethic for Our Time*. Contact Mary Brennen, brennen_mary@yahoo.com, for location information or to be added to the group's email notification list.

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Friends Members receive
a 10% discount.

Your purchase helps support the
Friends' educational programs at the
refuge. Thank you!

Friends Reach Legacy Fund Challenge Goal!

Thanks to the generous challenge grant offered by Ken and Mary Brennen in our summer issue, we have achieved our first major milestone in funding our Legacy (endowment) Fund at the Initiative Foundation. In less than one year, we have accumulated more than \$20,000 in the fund, and the Friends will begin to receive grants from the proceeds starting in 2012. This endowment fund will truly enable us to “pay it forward” by providing support for refuge educational programs and events far into the future. *Many thanks to all of you who have made this accomplishment possible!*

Give to the Max Day: Donate Online to Give the Friends a Chance to Win Big Money!

You may already know that you can renew your membership and donate \$10 or more to the Friends at our GiveMN.org page. From our **www.Explore Sherburne.org** website, click “Donate Online” in the navigation bar. Or you can go directly to **http://GiveMN.org**, search for “Friends of Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge,” and go to our page at **http://givemn.razoo.com/story/Friends-Of-Sherburne-National-Wildlife-Refuge**. Another option is to scan the code at the right into your iPhone or Android and immediately open the Friends of Sherburne page on GiveMN, where you can make an online donation.



This year, **Give to the Max Day** will be **Wednesday, November 16**. One donor will be chosen at random every hour to receive a “Golden Ticket” and have \$1,000 added to their donation. Better yet, one random \$10,000 “Grand Golden Ticket” will be given at 11:59 PM as Give to the Max Day ends.

In addition, \$15,000, \$10,000 and \$7,500 prize grants will be awarded to the top three small nonprofit organizations that receive the most dollars on Give to the Max Day; \$5,000 prize grants will be awarded to nonprofits in 4th through 10th place on the small nonprofit leaderboard.

Hey—we're one of those small nonprofits! Please consider “donating early and donating often” on Give to the Max Day and increase our chances of winning one of these grants. Remember, minimum donation is only \$10.

Christmas Bird Count



**Saturday
December 17**

Starting at 8:00 a.m.

Meet at the refuge headquarters.



The 2011 Christmas Bird Count will mark the 113th time volunteer birders have carried out this coast-to-coast census of wild bird populations. To participate, call the refuge at 763-389-3323 ext.13 or Dean Kleinhans at 763-389-1774.

This event is sponsored by the Friends of Sherburne.

Fall 2011 Wildlife Festival

by Betsy Beneke, Visitor Services Manager

A cool and breezy day greeted wildlife festival-goers on September 17. But the 800 people who attended didn't seem to mind.

They were here to celebrate National Wildlife Refuge Week and Sherburne's 46th birthday. The annual event included several new booths and activities.

Several refuge roads, not usually open to the public, were made available for folks to drive. The St. Francis Pool, which was in drawdown, proved to be a popular spot for bird watchers, as several species of shorebirds were present. Bald eagles were also abundant.

Many of our long time standard booths and activities kept visitors engaged, and after enjoying a hot dog and roasted marshmallow, families went home happy and better educated about Sherburne, our Friends and the importance of THEIR national wildlife refuge.



One youngster attending the Wildlife Festival with his mom commented that the food didn't cost as much as at the State Fair. Then he said, "Oh, I see. They aren't here to make money but to make people Happy!"



Live raptors at a meet and greet booth were hugely popular.

Bird Education was provided by Audubon Minnesota, Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery and the Wild Bird Center of Waite Park.



Carrol Henderson, MN DNR's Nongame Wildlife Program Supervisor, presented programs on both trumpeter swans and sandhill cranes - relating stories from his long history of wildlife conservation work in Minnesota.

Left: Carrol Henderson demonstrating his sandhill crane call.

THANK YOU

for your support and donations for the 2011 Wildlife Festival

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A TIP (Turn In Poachers) trailer displayed mounts on a "Wall of Shame" - showing a few of the many birds and mammals killed illegally in Minnesota.



A migration challenge game had children running an obstacle course, designed to mimic the rigors of bird migration. Those who navigated the course were "banded" for their efforts.



Mel Klein and company were on hand to provide horse-drawn wagon rides guided by volunteer interpretive naturalists.



A Minnesota Hobby Beekeeper's Association booth provided sweet treats and education about the plight of our pollinators.



A Wildlife Discovery booth provided opportunities for learning about macroinvertebrates that live in our wetlands, and the invasive earthworm project that the Friends and refuge will be participating in over the coming year.

The Scoop on Worms

As mentioned in the president's column, the Friends learned in July that our application for a grant to do an invasive earthworm study had been successful. Since the best time to study earthworms is when they mature in the fall, we immediately began gearing up—literally—to learn about these creatures and how to find them on the refuge. Soon boxes of safety glasses, plastic gloves, tweezers, mustard powder, alcohol, and formalin vials began arriving. As shopping continued, project co-chairs Jess Johnson and Sue Hix, along with “worm team” members April St. Aoro and Laura Pipenhagen, worked with refuge staff to plan and host a “worm workshop” on August 22. Imagine our surprise and delight when thirty-five educators, volunteers, staff members, St. Cloud State students, and even some elementary and middle school students arrived to learn about invasive earthworms and try their hand at extracting them around the headquarters building!

“Why the fuss?” you may ask. In a nutshell, earthworms in our area did not survive the last period of glaciation; those we find in our yards today are all exotic invaders that arrived with European settlers. Though a welcome sight on a fish hook or in the garden, earthworms are devastating northern hardwood forests and may be contributing to a cascade of negative effects on wildlife and biodiversity. Since no earthworm data exist for Sherburne County or the



Above: Anne Sittauer, Refuge Manager, welcoming participants to the Worm Watch.
Below: The team leaders



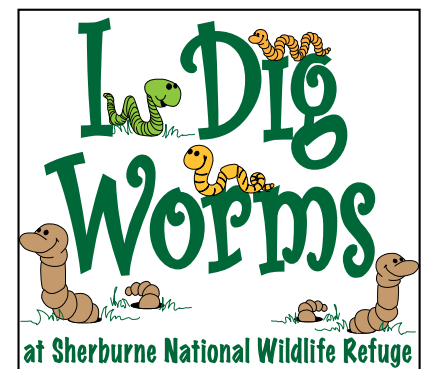
refuge, the Friends of Sherburne decided to organize a citizen science project to contribute to the Great Lakes Worm Watch earthworm database (University of MN – Duluth) and determine what impact, if any, earthworms are having on refuge habitats.

Worms are also proving to be a good way to attract people to the refuge to

try their hand at real science. Several family groups were successful in extracting earthworms during the Wildlife Festival on Sept. 17. Then on Oct. 5 a group of 36 St. Cloud Alternative Learning Center students, grades 10 – 12, and teachers visited to learn about the refuge and sample for earthworms on the Wildlife

Drive. On another front, teachers have indicated their interest in working with us to develop curriculum aligned with state standards, test it in the classroom, and then bring students to the refuge to contribute to the earthworm database.

The project is “off and wiggling,” made possible in part by a grant from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation. Please let us know if you or someone you know would be interested in participating!



Why did the turtle cross the road?

By Lizzy Berkley, Refuge Wildlife Biologist

With their bright yellow chin, muted yellow spots covering a smooth helmet-shaped carapace (upper shell), and their medium to large size, the Blanding's turtles are unmistakable! Like many species of turtles, Blanding's have a reputation to be mild-mannered, docile, and exceptionally long-lived. Because of these characteristics, it is not surprising that turtles are emblems of longevity, wisdom, and tranquility in many cultures around the world. The Blanding's longevity record in the wild is 77 years old! Not only are they long-lived individuals but they are also an ancient species dating back 5.5 million years.

Most populations are small, patchy, and at risk of extinction. Blanding's turtles are listed as "threatened" in the state of Minnesota. The predominant threat contributing to their population decline is habitat loss and fragmentation and nest predation. Egg and juvenile mortality is very high in this species at approximately 75%. Therefore, protecting the adults is critical to the conservation strategy of this long-lived species.

Blanding's turtles are dependent on both upland and wetland habitats. The refuge provides extensive shallow marshes and shrub swamps adjacent to prairies and savannas making it an ideal home for Blanding's turtles. They typically overwinter in muddy bottoms of wetlands and emerge in late March to early April. In June, females may travel up to 1 mile overland from their resident marsh to their nest site. After a development period of approximately 2 months, hatchlings leave the nest anywhere from mid-August through early October.

So, why did the turtle cross the road? Besides the obvious - getting to quality habitat on the refuge, they are likely migrating to their nesting site in the spring or returning to their wintering area in the fall. When 'trying to get to the other side' they are extremely vulnerable to automobiles, another factor contributing to their decline.

A mark-recapture study was initiated in 2003 to investigate various aspects of population demography of Blanding's turtles on the refuge. Captured



Photo: Jim Williams

turtles are marked with a unique identification code by filing notches in the marginal scutes (outer rim of the carapace), each scute corresponding to a letter in the alphabet. In addition to marking the turtles, size, gender, and reproductive status are also collected for each turtle. As you may expect, long-term studies are needed to estimate populations of long-lived species, so the results are 'as slow as a turtle'! Thus, the refuge's mark-recapture program is ongoing. As of 2010, 86 turtles have been marked on the refuge and 7 have been "recaptured". Based on this rate, the estimated population of Blanding's turtles on the refuge is approximately 945. A highlight of this year's Wildlife Festival was the discovery of a Blanding's turtle nest with hatchlings just emerging and starting their long, dangerous trek to their new marshy home for the winter.



Blandings hatchlings



Photo: Ken Brennen

THE PRAIRIE'S EDGE

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- Please send information about the Refuge Volunteer Program.

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Please make checks payable to Friends of Sherburne NWR, 17076 293rd Ave., Zimmerman, MN 55398
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Other Ways to Support the Friends and Refuge Programs

(Check a box below to select the donation you wish to make.)

Friends' Wildlife Circle Donation

- Bald Eagle . . . \$10,000 and above
- Trumpeter Swan \$5,000 – \$9,999
- Osprey \$2,500 – \$4,999
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- Great Blue Heron \$500 – \$999
- Common Loon \$250 – \$499
- Mallard \$100 – \$249
- Red-headed Woodpecker \$ 50 – \$ 99
- Bluebird \$ 25 – \$49

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This gift will be dedicated to the creation of the Discovery Center and Programs.

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This gift is in memory/honor (circle one) of:
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Who Are The Friends? The Friends of Sherburne is a non-profit group formed to support refuge projects and educational programs. **THE PRAIRIE'S EDGE**, the newsletter for the Friends of Sherburne, is published quarterly for its members in cooperation with Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge. Information about the Friends of Sherburne is also available at www.exploresherburne.org.

Graphic Designer: Mary Brennen. Editor: Ken Brennen. You can contact Ken at kenbrennen@yahoo.com or 612-280-3645.

WINTERFEST 2012

Saturday,
February 4
10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Mark your calendar



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 NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
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