

PRAIRIE'S EDGE

A NEWSLETTER FROM FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

SUMMER 2019

"WELCOME to Prairie's Edge Wildlife Drive!"

Story and photographs
by Bruce Ellingson

Judy Hidde gazed out over the wetlands, sorted through the thousands of mental snapshots from her 20 years of volunteering with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and explained how she found purpose here on the Prairie's Edge Wildlife Drive.

From the observation deck at the Oak Savanna Trail, Judy watched the wildlife play, relaxed in the May sunshine, and let the stories tumble out. Usually, at this spot on the Wildlife Drive, she's far too busy to stop to talk about herself. Usually, on Sundays, May through October, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Judy walks the Oak Savanna Trail as her first stop on the Wildlife Drive, chatting with visitors, handing out coloring books, or identifying for someone the call of a common yellow-throated warbler. Then she'll hop in her car hoping to complete one circuit of the 7-mile Wildlife Drive during her three-hour shift.

*"It was the best thing
that ever happened to me."*

This day in May, Judy has agreed to tell this Prairie's Edge Newsletter reporter—a novice Rover himself—what she's learned in 20 years of being a Volunteer Roving Interpreter. The story begins with Judy taking an early retirement from United Power As-



Volunteer Roving Interpreter Judy Hidde is "ON DUTY", and loves it.

sociation in Elk River in December of 1998. But Judy discovered she wasn't ready for retirement and was devastated. "I cried for three months... And then I picked up the local newspaper and there was a plea for volunteers at Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge. And they were having a class.

"Boom, I had a purpose, I had a new focus. It was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Judy and her husband

were canoers and backpackers. They lived on 80 acres in the country where they fed birds and enjoyed the wildlife, but her personal enjoyment of nature required no public explanation. The public interaction of roving scared her, or so she tells me. If ever true, her fears are now 20-years gone, and her smile, her warmth, and her energy make every visitor welcome.

She loves the human interaction. "When people care enough to come out here, I'm so excited to see them," she admits. "I just love showing the wildlife we have here, the wildflowers are just amazing and, in the fall, the grasses all bloom and it's magical. And I just

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Judy, who contributed this photo, on her first day of Roving.



By President Myrna Krueger

Last year we celebrated our 25th year as the Friends of Sherburne. We’ve come a long way! As they say, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us—providing educational opportunities for visitors and students, advocating for the refuge, supporting conservation projects, and raising funds to furnish the beautiful Oak Savanna Learning Center that our communities enjoy today.

But how do we sustain our organization to be able to continue to support refuge efforts over the long term? While current “big” Friends projects include engaging a part-time contracted naturalist for youth/adult nature education, funding the Wildlife Festival, supporting the Learning Center, printing refuge brochures, and helping renovate the first stop on the Wildlife Drive, future needs may include projects like these and more.

That’s why the Friends Sustainability Committee is planning ahead to assure that future efforts can flourish. Members include Matt Finn, Sue Hix, Bill Kolbinger, Mike Rajala, John Riebel, and Carol VanHeel. The committee is striving to make the Friends an enduring enterprise—by working with donors and communities, offering planned giving options, and campaigning for our legacy fund at the Initiative Foundation.

I hope you’ll “raise your hand” in any number of ways. Ready to write a check or set up a donor-advised fund? Great! If you’re not there yet, though, you can start by asking questions, sharing ideas, attending a meeting of—or even joining—the Sustainability Committee. Please call us if you have ideas to share or would like more information about planned giving or legacy gifts. We would love to hear from you. You can reach Sue Hix (612-269-1937) or me (763-234-0038) with questions or suggestions.

Heads up. You are invited to attend an informational presentation—no sales pitches!—about planned giving options on September 17, 11 am – 1 pm, in the St. Michael area. Our hosts from the Initiative Foundation are bringing consultant Dana Holt to our area to outline the latest in planned giving options and to answer our questions. Please contact us for details.

**FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NWR
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- Alaina Larkin – Visitor Services**

The Friends of Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization (EIN: 41-1763001) that supports refuge projects and educational programs. All contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. The Prairie’s Edge newsletter is published twice annually for members in cooperation with the refuge. Contact the Friends c/o Sherburne NWR, 17076 293rd Avenue NW, Zimmerman, MN 55398, or at FriendsOfSherburne@gmail.com.

**Donate or join Friends online
at ExploreSherburne.org**

In a Nutshell-- er, Eggshell?

By Alaina Larkin, Visitor Services Specialist

At the refuge we are embracing the digital age and promoting the use of eBird for both volunteers and visitors, including our Volunteer Interpretive Rovers on the Wildlife Drive. What is this, you may ask? According to ebird.org, “eBird is the world’s largest biodiversity-related citizen science project, with more than 100 million bird sightings contributed each



year by eBirders around the world.” This project relies on citizens worldwide to report the avian species that they spot while on a casual hike or a serious trek. You don’t need to be an expert to



Photo by Jana Harrer. Egret on Wildlife Drive.

use this resource! Reporting to eBird provides the refuge not only with usable data in an online database, it also gives visitors an idea of what they could see on a trip to Sherburne by viewing the refuge website’s Recent Sightings page.

On a larger scale, data has been used in bird research around the world, to inform conservation decisions, in academic papers, and countless student projects. If you’re interested in delving into eBird, I suggest reviewing their Quick Start Guide or free eBird Academy videos. For the down and dirty how-to: download the app onto your mobile device (see below for details), launch the app, create a free account, hit “Start New Checklist,” select your location, and then you will be supplied with a checklist for the area for that time of year. You’ll need to keep track of how long you observed, both the time spent and distance travelled. As well, keep track of the number of each species that you spot. The relative counts are important for data quality, with a sighting of one great blue heron contrasted by sighting 35 red-winged blackbirds. Want your observations to appear on the Recent Sightings page? When you select your location, click “Choose a Nearby Hotspot” and select the most relevant Sherburne NWR hotspot.

eBird checklists can be entered and edited on a desktop computer at eBird.org or on a mobile device. The free app is available in the App Store for iOS devices and in the Google Play Store for Android devices.



Photo by Mark Nicholson. Northern Parula on Prairie’s Edge Wildlife Drive.

FACELIFT PLANNED FOR FIRST STOP ON WILDLIFE DRIVE



Friends leader Dean Kleinhans and refuge staffer Bill Strong review refurbishing plans for the entry point of the Oak Savanna Trail.

During a typical year, the refuge sees visits from 85,000 community members and travelers from afar. Among these, an estimated 37,000 tour the Wildlife Drive to observe, photograph, and learn about the refuge’s wildlife and habitats. The usual first stop for these visitors—and the 38 volunteer Roving Interpreters—is the Oak Savanna Trail pullover. Unfortunately, despite ongoing maintenance efforts, the kiosk site at our refuge’s “front door” has succumbed to Minnesota weather and old age. It’s time for the refuge version of This Old House!

To help fund a major renovation, last year the Friends applied for—and received—a grant of more than \$14,000 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to update this first stop on the Wildlife Drive and make it a true refuge Welcome Station. Since the basic estimated project cost is more than \$30,000, the Friends committed a cash match of \$12,000 plus more than \$7,000 “in-kind,” including volunteer hours and vendor discounts.

Would you consider contributing to this project? Not sure? Read on!

Imagine that you’re a Roving Interpreter or maybe a birder or photographer who has traveled more than 50 miles from the Cities to enjoy the refuge’s auto tour route. The sign at the drive entrance beckons you in, and—especially if you’re a first-timer—you’re pleased to see a stopping place with structures just inside the gate. “Ah, toilet facilities. Hmm, cool signs about the refuge and lots of visitor information! Neat trail and observation deck. Great, a list of the wildlife and blooming plants seen this week. Wow, a place for me and my companion to eat our sandwiches and chat

after we tour the drive! And there will even be a talk and activity about monarchs at 3 pm!” **This, and more, is on the way!**

Part of the work to be done this summer is “infrastructure,” including concrete to replace crumbling asphalt—maybe not very exciting, but an important basic element to build on. Beyond that, to enhance the visitor experience for years to come, the project will focus on low maintenance/durability of materials, accessibility to people of all abilities, and addition of new features to increase visitor enjoyment. Features will include:

- A new 3-panel kiosk with updated interpretive signage, message board, and brochure holders
- Vandal-proof picnic table with benches
- Concrete pad for kiosk and picnic table area
- Concrete walkway from the comfort station to kiosk area
- Boulders to serve as natural bollards to replace split-rail fence

Of course, the above is just part of the initial “shopping list.” It’s the ongoing benefits that really matter, and these will be able to grow over the years because the space is planned so that features may be added as funding becomes available. **Are you interested now?**

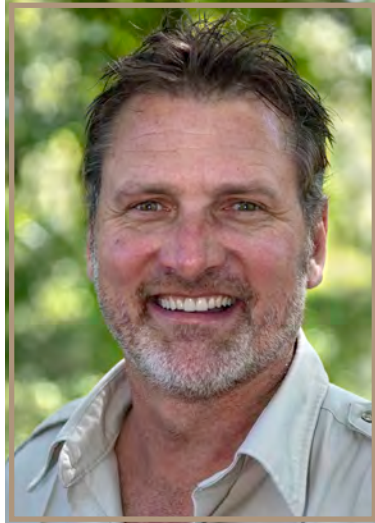
Cash gifts of any amount can help us meet the grant match—maybe even enable us to add a picnic table, Blue Goose bike rack, or more interpretive signs.

Ready to commit? Give to the Friends online at GiveMN.org or send a check to the Friends c/o the refuge.

INSIDE THE REFUGE

By Steve Karel, Project Leader

Hello, Friends—what a successful spring we have had for getting habitat management projects implemented. Even with a wet spring, our prescribed fire season was extraordinary. With most of our staff being “red carded,” meaning they are wildland-fire certified, we successfully put fire on over 7,000 acres at Sherburne NWR. This well surpassed our average of 4,000 acres annually. This very challenging work requires significant planning, a highly qualified fire crew, and perfect weather and wind direction. One of our primary goals was to focus on invasive hybrid cattail that had been chemically treated last fall. We hope that with aggressive management actions, this



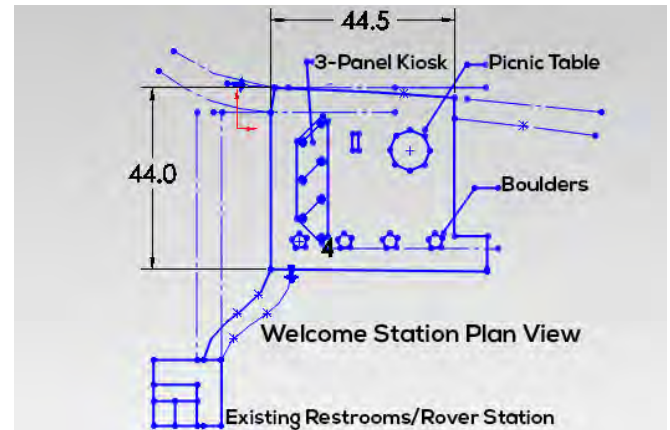
invasive species will soon be replaced with smartweed, wild rice, and other desirable native wetland plants.

We are also excited about an upcoming grant-funded project that will provide an opportunity to introduce goats to the Mahnomen Trail this summer. The goats will be a biological treatment method to remove invasive or non-native vegetation in and along the Mahnomen Trail, therefore benefitting the oak savanna habitat. Goats are excellent browsers and will eat almost anything. We have had tremendous success over the past six years using cattle grazing to help manage our vegetation in wetlands, oak savanna, and prairie and are enthusiastic about this new endeavor. Keep your eyes peeled for these interesting animals as you are out hiking on the Mahnomen Trail.

Last, please be patient with the construction you may witness on the refuge this summer. We are looking forward to a new asphalt parking lot at the Oak Savanna Learning Center. Further, road closures, de-

tours, and orange cones may be prevalent as both County Rd 9 and County Rd 16 receive new road surfaces this summer.

In addition, the refuge staff will be con-



structing new information kiosks and signage at all of the refuge entrances as well as the Mahnomen Trail. The Friends of Sherburne received a grant to remodel the first stop at the Prairie’s Edge Wildlife Drive (see above). These will all be great improvements for the refuge and could only be possible with the support from the Friends of Sherburne.

Stay Wild, My Friends!

EVENT SUPPORTERS

Our April 6 Rhythm and Brews fundraiser with the Sherburne History Center was a success. Many thanks to event donors!

Businesses

Bailey Ray’s Roadhouse, Bolt Hoffer
Boyd Law Firm, Charlie’s, Chatters,
Hiway Liquor, Los Ortizes, Minzel Mas-
sage, Nelson Nursery Garden Center,
Norwegian Wood Retreat, P&A Liquor,
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Nelson, Jim Stroschein, Cathy Hegg,
Polly Class, Dave Martin, Mike Brubak-
er, Nancy Fiereck, Barb Gulbrandson,
Karah Hawkinson

By Nancy Haugen
Refuge Visitor Services Manager, retired

When I started work at Sherburne Refuge in November 1995 as the Public Use Specialist, managing the volunteer program was among my list of responsibilities. Since the refuge had a Wildlife Drive open to the public seven days a week I saw the perfect opportunity to start a Roving Interpreter (Rover) volunteer program that could be modeled after the Rover program already in place at J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR, Sanibel, Florida.

I had worked at "Ding" Darling Refuge as the Volunteer Coordinator for three years. To find volunteers for Sherburne Refuge, I started by offering the opportunity to the board members of the Sherburne Natural History Association, which later became The Friends of Sherburne NWR. I also sent a public service announcement to several local newspapers. Twelve people contacted me expressing interest and they became our first Rovers. Our first orientation for Roving Interpreters was on May 3, 1996. The Roving program at Sherburne is now in its 23rd year. The primary purpose of the Roving program was to provide refuge volunteers on the Drive to answer questions by visitors during hours when the Refuge Headquarters was closed.

There is one current Rover, Robin DeLong, who was one of the first 12. The Rovers were asked to commit to spending 2–3 hours each week on the Wildlife Drive during the months of May through September to provide refuge information to the visitors and assist visitors in identifying birds. This first group was able to cover three evenings each week: Thursday, Friday and Saturday, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday afternoons from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. My estimate



is that during that first season Rovers were on the Drive a total of 504 hours.

Editor's Note: Nancy tipped off the Prairie's Edge Newsletter to a story about Rover Judy Hidde's first day Roving. Judy then gave us the details during our recent interview (SEE COVER STORY). Here is the story of how novice Rover Judy Hidde described her very first visitor contact, day one in spring of 1999:

"The very first Sunday I roved, green as they come, and my partner was a student from St. Cloud State...so we are just charged up and all enthused and ready, and we get down to the first water control structure. And there was a white van parked along the road and a guy in the ditch in t-shirt and shorts throwing mud and muck here and there and we think, 'This is not good...this is not good at all!'"

Judy and her fellow Rover had been warned to approach people causing problems with caution, so they got out and began with, "Hi there. What are you doing?" Well the fellow says 'the darn beavers are always clogging up the channel and you have to get out here every day and clean out the muck,' and we ask, 'Well, who are you?'"

The guy in the baseball cap was Refuge Manager Charlie Blair, now Chief of Refuges, Region 3, USFWS! He came out of the ditch and shared a wealth of information about habitat management on the refuge with the novice Rovers.

Judy described him as "Very nice! Had I looked at the van and seen the government plates, that would have made a difference."

Now, she laughs at her own inexperience 20 years ago. She likely remembers the moment and probably smiles each time she passes that water control structure as she heads into the Wildlife Drive once again.

During 2018, Rovers volunteered 1852 hours on the Prairie's Edge Wildlife Drive and had contact with 1600 visitors.

FIND US ON YOUTUBE!

For our most recent nature education video, go to: <https://youtu.be/lemrRTYwEjc>

Nature... "PRESENTS ITSELF"

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want our visitors to feel that."

Talk to her for even a minute on the Oak Savanna Trail, and you will feel that sense of wonder. She wears her official sky-blue polo, her U.S. Fish & Wildlife badge, and her volunteer name tag proudly. Even on this Wednesday, she's here to serve. And as a newbie Rover, I need her advice.

"What do you tell visitors?" I ask.

"We're in wildlife habitat and on their grounds, and nature sort of just presents itself on their terms. And if you're lucky, you get to be a part of it," she tells me. "I encourage people to hike the two trails we have here because they're beautiful and there is stuff happening on them all the time."

"What do visitors ask you?" I inquire.

"Are you seeing anything today? is the most common question. And I'll run through a few things, some things that are real obvious that they're probably going to see. And I usually tell them, 'Look up. There are eagles flying. We have red-tail hawks. We have northern harriers, sandhill cranes.' I'll tell them the difference between the profile of the sandhill crane and the great blue heron when they're flying."

Judy inspects the wetlands again and nods north. "Right now, I'm looking for where the loons are nesting because I know they are. I haven't found them yet."

During her training, Rovers were required to be able to identify 25 species of birds before they put on USFWS blue. Judy was pretty sure that was impossible, but she took three trips out on the Wildlife Drive with veteran Roving Interpreters to practice her bird identification and prepare for the test "and I think I squeaked through," she reports with a smile. "I'm still not good with certain things, but you learn. You learn by shape and size and flight pattern and... it's just fun!"

One Sunday during spring migration years ago, she stopped to talk to a gentleman walking the Wildlife Drive's northern trail—the Woodland Trail. As they chatted she discovered he had identified 22 species of warblers by their calls. "I didn't know there were any there! So, it's a gift. I'm so much better than I was, but I'll never be one of those people."

Of course, she is one of "those people." For

20 years she has been cruising the 7-mile loop at near walking speed because, she says, it fulfills a need in her to be involved on the refuge.

"When I'm a Rover, I call it 'me time.'"

Well, "Me" and dozens of her latest Sunday acquaintances. When she began roving, Sunday at the drive was rarely a "family day." Now she delights in distributing coloring books and learning about birds from children. "The little kids with their binoculars, they're so excited. They can identify stuff and they want to be here...and it's just gratifying to be a part of that," she says. "That" is the warblers heading north in May or the cranes and their colts or the lupine in bloom in June or the monarchs headed south in September. For others, the refuge is an escape.

"Some of them, I think, just like the openness, the solitude, that natural state of the place...Last Sunday I talked to a gentleman who was going a third time around the drive. He just couldn't get enough of it." Judy tells people to go slow, to observe, and sometimes just to sit and wait: "It's a place where critters can live. They can raise their young. They can do what



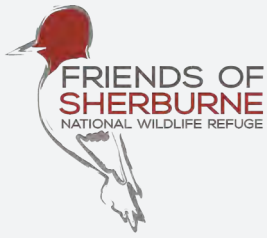
Judy Hidde on Oak Savanna Trail.

they do. They can be a beaver, or a muskrat, or an eagle, or whatever they want to be, and it's their home and we're lucky enough that we can drive through and catch a glimpse of that."

Judy's favorite spot on the drive is the last viewing deck with a spotting scope on Nelson Pool—between the 4 and 4½ mile mark. It's in the shade, cool on a hot day. On days when she's not working (on Sundays, she doesn't have time to sit and contemplate nature) she'll grab a lunch and sit in the shade of the deck.

The year her husband died—it was in September—she came here after his funeral.

"I just came out here and I just centered there. That place is special to me."



17076 293rd Avenue NW
Zimmerman, MN 55398

FIND US ON:    
[ExploreSherburne.org](https://www.exploresherburne.org)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Bird Tours:

- Saturday, August 24, 8 – 10 am, meet at Mahnomen Trail
- Saturday, August 31, 8 – 10 am, meet at Blue Hill Trail

Wildflower Tours:

- Saturday, September 7, 10 am – noon, Oak Savanna Learning Center
- Saturday, September 14, 10 am – noon, Oak Savanna Learning Center

Wildlife Festival:

- Saturday, September 28, 10 am – 3 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center

Sandhill Crane Tours:

- October 17, 19, 23, 26, 6:30 – 9 am, Oak Savanna Learning Center
Reservations are required & open on September 9.

Friends Read, *The Invention of Nature* by Andrea Wulf

- Tuesday, October 29, 6:30 – 8 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center

5th Annual Youth Photography Contest

- Friday, October 11, Submission Deadline
- Tuesday, November 19, Awards Ceremony, Oak Savanna Learning Center
- More information and entry form at: fws.gov/uploadedFiles/Photo_Contest_Entry_Flyer_and_Form_2019.pdf

Friends website: [ExploreSherburne.org](https://www.exploresherburne.org). Refuge website: fws.gov/refuge/Sherburne/