By Myrna Krueger
Cheers! As we go to press, con-
struction has already begun on the
amphitheater at the Oak Savanna
Learning Center! After 5 years of
planning, working with contractors,
fundraising, hosting events, applying
for grants, coordinating details, and
planning some more, we couldn’t be
more excited that the dream is about
to come true.

On May 18 during the refuge’s
Spring Celebration, the Friends
held an official groundbreaking to
commemorate the start of construc-
tion. The site was ready to go with
earthmoving equipment in place and
a silt fence cordoning off the site.
Safety signage all around let visitors
know not to enter the construction
zone. The site will continue to be
posted during the entire construction
period, lasting approximately two
months. Special thanks to general
contractor Terra Construction and to
Damon Farber Landscape Architects
for getting us to this stage!

Maybe you’re wondering what
the amphitheater will have to offer.
How about unobstructed views of the
nearby wetlands and oak savanna?
Or a place to meet friends for hikes
or birding adventures—or maybe the
perfect spot to sit alone and contem-
plate the beauty around you? A cen-
Continued on page 7
New President Promises “Welcoming” Refuge

By Carol Mertesdorf, Friends President

As the new president of the Friends of Sherburne NWR, I want to thank Steve Chesney for his leadership for the past 3 years as well as for his ongoing assistance. The board of directors, a constantly evolving group, welcomed three new members this year as we said farewell and thanks to two others. Now I’d like to introduce myself as your new president.

A little about myself. I have 24 years of experience in hospital and clinic laboratories as a medical technologist. I went back to college at Anoka-Ramsey Community College (ARCC) and St. Cloud State University (SCSU) and obtained a second bachelor’s degree in environmental science. During this time, I was introduced to Sherburne NWR and became a volunteer, working on wetlands educational materials and performing various volunteer duties over the years. I also joined the Friends of Sherburne NWR soon after starting to volunteer.

After graduating from SCSU, I worked for the Metropolitan Mosquito Control District for three summers and then for four years in the Commercial Hazardous Waste Department of Hennepin County. I left in July 2020 with the idea of volunteering more at the refuge! But of course, there was COVID. Once we were able to get back to volunteer work, my focus was and continues to be on nature education for area 2nd and 4th graders. As nature education visits for this school year wind down, I am reminded how important the refuge is for teaching respect for our natural world. I look forward to the completion of the amphitheater, as this will be a great site for gathering students to contemplate and share their refuge experiences.

Now, as the newly elected president, I hope to lead the Friends of Sherburne as well as past presidents have done. I confess, I’ve never been president of anything before. I’ve always preferred to be the “right hand man,” but I am ready for this opportunity and challenge! The Friends of SNWR has a strategic goal of increasing our diversity, equity, and inclusiveness. The area population is increasingly diverse, and yet I don’t see an increasingly diverse spectrum of people utilizing this wonderful natural space. I, and the board, are working to make the refuge a place for everyone to feel welcome and comfortable while birding, hiking, nature bathing, snowshoeing, taking photos, or enjoying other approved activities on the refuge.

I am now also volunteering as the refuge’s Community Outreach Coordinator and hope to inspire those who are interested in representing the refuge at community events and activities to volunteer throughout the year! The refuge staff need our support, outreach, and advocacy.

Please introduce yourself at the Wildlife Festival, or an outreach event—I enjoy getting to know our Friends. And you can always email me with comments or concerns at friendsofsherburne@gmail.com

Donate or Join Friends of Sherburne Online at ExploreSherburne.org

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. Editor is Sue Hix.

Contact Sue or the Friends c/o Sherburne NWR, 17076 293rd Avenue NW, Zimmerman, MN 55398, or at friendsofsherburne@gmail.com
Looking Out On The Refuge Landscape, And Its History

By Greg Dehmer, Assistant Refuge Manager

This spring I hiked to the top of Blue Hill to get a good view of the refuge landscape before the leaves from a new growing season obscured portions of the wonderful vantage point. Blue Hill is a great place to survey the vastness and diversity of the refuge from all directions. As I often do when I make the trek up to the top and look around, I ponder what I would have seen if I had been there in the 1700’s or earlier, looking out from Blue Hill. How different would it look from how it looks today? If I could transport myself in time, I believe that I would see a mosaic of wetlands, prairie, and oak savanna. I also believe that in the vastness I would see animals that we know and love today, including some that are no longer on the landscape.

If you read the original land surveyor notes from the mid-1800’s, they describe a land mostly covered with a light, scattered growth of bur and black oak. Tamarac swamps, lakes, brush, creeks, and marsh lands also prevailed. Sound familiar? In many ways I can envision what was being described back then in the refuge we know and love today, especially the oak savanna habitat. The main difference is that, today, oak savanna habitat is an extremely rare plant community in the Midwest, where it is estimated that only .02% of the historic habitat remains. Oak savanna is one of the many things that makes the refuge a special place, worth protecting.

To maintain the refuge landscape, we strive to mimic some of the natural disturbances that helped shape the refuge habitat historically, specifically fire and grazing. Oak savanna is a fire dependent community where regular fires are critical to help remove older growth and vegetation, allowing for new growth to occur. Periodic disturbances such as prescribed burns, occurring every 3-5 years or longer, are effective in suppressing understory shrubs and trees. Burns favor thicker barked bur oaks while suppressing other tree species like red oaks with thinner bark. Fire also helps to reduce invasive species, such as buckthorn, and remove accumulated hazardous fuels. Disturbances such as prescribed fire and grazing help allow more sunlight to filter through the trees to promote increased growth in grasses and forbs.

“Looking out from Blue Hill.”

This spring our fire management staff successfully completed more than 4,000 acres of controlled burns on the refuge landscape. Most of the acres treated with fire were west of County Road 5. Typically, refuge staff burns in a block rotation, which rotates from year to year. By utilizing the block management strategy, refuge staff can focus preparatory work on fire breaks and control lines in one portion of the refuge rather than across the entire refuge. This is not only a much more efficient use of staff time, but we can also use the black from previous burns as a control line for the next burn. This year the NW block of the refuge was in rotation, and next spring the SE portion of the refuge will be targeted.

In addition to the prescribed fire management duties, refuge firefighters vigilantly respond to calls to suppress wildfires both off and on the refuge. This includes fires across Minnesota and the nation. Our firefighters provide this service for the American public with pride. With the number of houses on the landscape, the ability for refuge staff to assist with wildfire response is critical.

As I close, I want to invite you to take the trip up to Blue Hill to enjoy the views and think about what disturbances are required to maintain the habitat. Also, try to imagine how things might have looked in the distant past and, most importantly, enjoy your National Wildlife Refuge!
A Nesting Journey: Dodging Danger Toward A Fertile Refuge

By Jade Pederson
Visitor Services Specialist

While the warm afternoon sun bathes a wetland landscape in early June, a lone female Blanding’s turtle finds herself stirred by an undeniable sensation. An instinct as old as her yellow-chinned, dome-shelled species beckons her forth, sparked by a visit from a large male Blanding’s turtle weeks ago. Though the urge to further her state-threatened species is ancient, many of the challenges she faces now are new.

In her fourth year of breeding, this resilient Blanding’s turtle has been unsuccessful in all previous nesting attempts. Her first annual nesting journey led her eastward to find an area with sandy soil and just enough sunlight. The turtle navigated over several treacherous roads with speeding vehicles, only just evading the fate of becoming a mere memory. Dodging danger at every turn, she eventually found herself in a landscape dominated by human habitation, where manicured lawns contrasted starkly with her natural habitat. After traveling over a mile of strange terrain, she finally found an area with loose soil so excavated her nesting site to deposit her first clutch. However, her untiring efforts were not rewarded. Two months later, her offspring emerged into an extreme world, unable to navigate over the hazardous roads that separated them from the safety and nourishment of a pond. During the second year of breeding, the

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young turtle left the protection of water and instead ventured south, encountering several predators on the journey. With her sturdy shell as her fortress, she was protected from hungry raccoons, skunks, and foxes. But her nest did not have the same armor and its scent would attract predators for the next several days. After she had carefully dug, laid, and covered her eggs, she went to a nearby bush to rest for the remainder of the night. By the morning, the nest had been ransacked with only broken shells left behind.

In her most recent nesting journey, the determined turtle went north into field after field of loose, fertile earth with orderly rows of sprouting vegetation. In the heart of agricultural lands, she excavated and laid her third nest in an area sure to get lots of sun. However, the fast-growing crops quickly shaded the nest while farm machinery operated, and the nest was once again unsuccessful.

As the evening sun dips below the horizon on this fading summer day, the lone turtle is compelled westward to attempt once again to secure her lineage. With nearly 25 years of survival and adaptation to lead the way, the determined Blanding’s turtle leaves the safety of her pond. Vehicles whoosh by and she again finds herself needing to cross a busy road. At turtle speed, a deliberate trek across the road is essential as the pull to nest continues to call her forward. While some vehicles race past, one slows down and lets her cross safely.

The turtle is not alone on her journey. This instinct is within them both, and their persistence helps ensure their species’ survival.

Continued determination to fulfill the ancient instinct leads the young female to find a place to nest. With great attention, she lays her eggs upon refuge lands, and the probability of clutch survival has increased. In this sanctuary, shielded from the disruptions of human interference, she and the potential hatchlings now contend only with the timeless forces that these turtles have evolved with. Not far from the tranquil wetlands she passed earlier, she starts to head back that way, finding a place in her new home. Finally, the young, determined Blanding’s turtle has a moment of peace at Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, a brief moment in the ever-evolving cycle of nature.

“With nearly 25 years of survival and adaptation, the Blanding’s turtle leaves the safety of her pond.”

Arrival of New Refuge Leader Is A Homecoming

Continued from page 1
1999. Later that year, he was ecstatic to land a temporary job at Necedah NWR in Wisconsin, beginning his 25-year career in the USFWS.

Peterson’s path in conservation includes roles as a wildlife biologist, wildlife refuge specialist, manager of Wapanocca NWR in Arkansas, manager of the Parker River NWR Complex in New England, and most recently Project Leader for Horicon NWR-Leopold WMD Complex in Wisconsin.

Peterson’s decision to return to Sherburne stems from his desire to reconnect with the refuge and its evolving landscape. “I’ve changed a lot since 1995, and I know that Sherburne has, too,” he acknowledges. “I’m honored to return to Sherburne NWR and lead the Complex in resolving our management challenges and helping to support the next generation of conservationists.”

As Peterson settles back into Sherburne, he eagerly looks ahead to upcoming projects and challenges. One particularly exciting endeavor is the County Road 5 bike/pedestrian trail project, which aligns with Peterson’s commitment to community engagement and conservation. “This trail will be a wonderful place for families to exercise, observe wildlife, and appreciate the oak savanna and wetland habitats that we’re conserving for their benefit,” says Peterson.

Peterson has cultivated meaningful relationships with wildlife “Friends” organizations, recognizing their invaluable contributions to wildlife conservation. “I’ve worked with six wonderful Friends organizations,” Peterson says. “I’m grateful to all Friends members for your willingness to organize and promote our cherished resources.”

Outside of his professional endeavors, Peterson is often joined by his wife, Stacy, and their children, James and Ellie. They are excited to explore Central Minnesota’s natural wonders.
Community Supporters
Summer Edition 2024

Trumpeter Swan $15,000-$24,999
Bernick Family Foundation

Bald Eagle $10,000-$14,999
Knife River
L & N Andreas Foundation

White-tailed Deer $5000-9999
Becker True Value Hardware
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St Paul Saints Baseball Club
Vita Bella Ristorante Italiano
Walmart Princeton
Zimmerman Home & Garden

Above from left, Gretchen Martin, Sheila Skogen and Robin DeLong manage the duck display at Spring Celebration. Volunteer Baylee Riddle (right) helped Lucy Sue Chambers fashion a bee headband at the nature’s craft booth and the pair posed proudly displaying their matching headbands.
Amphitheater Underway!

Continued from page 1

tral location with plenty of space for students to sketch or make notes in their nature journals after exploring Learning Center trails? And of course, a roomy venue for presentations at refuge events like the Wildlife Festival!

Cast-in-place concrete will provide a low maintenance and long-wearing surface. Pipe and tube railings at the stairs will provide visitors with handrails for easy movement between the three levels. Boulders will provide erosion control and mark the edges with natural visual interest. Installation of electrical service will provide future presenters with the ability to use sound equipment. Paved access from the Learning Center and a six-foot-wide accessible paved concrete pathway will let visitors move from the top level to the stage with potential for native plantings in the pocket between.

As a special feature of the amphitheater, the Friends commissioned the work of Dakota artist Holly Young and Ojibwe artist Giizh Agaton Howes to collaborate to create a design that incorporates Native values and includes plants and animals of significance to the refuge. The purpose of the artwork is to honor the Indigenous Peoples - the original stewards of the land. It is well known that many Tribal Nations, including the Dakota and Ojibwe, were strongly connected to and thrived on the land and waters of the present-day Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge.

Center stage will be a representation of sacred Indian Tobacco surrounded by a continuum of animal wildlife important to both Native American culture and Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge. A circular floral hoop drawn in Native American quillwork style will surround the center representing native plants of Minnesota prairie, wetland, and woodland. Animal names will be shown in Ojibwe and Dakota languages on vertical seat walls along with unique hoof, paw, or the bird track of the animals shown below. The presence of traditional yet contemporary Native American art will give visibility to the important past and current presence of Indigenous people in Minnesota. The artwork will be etched into the concrete using a sandblasting method.

We are pleased to announce that, thanks to many generous donors and a significant grant just received from the Central Minnesota Arts Board*, the Friends have reached our goal to raise $410,000 for the amphitheater! Thank you to everyone! We continue to be amazed and inspired by the big-hearted support for the refuge – more than 550 have donated for the benefit of the amphitheater, including more than 75 Community Supporters, i.e. civic groups, foundations, and businesses.

We wish to give a special thank you to refuge staff members Greg Dehmer and Jade Pederson. Their unwavering support has helped us plan for and build an amphitheater that will provide outstanding experiences for visitors and students for years to come.

For more information or to donate, www.ExploreSherburne.org/gowild

*This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Central MN Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.
Upcoming Events—All Events Are Free!

WILDFLOWER WALK
Saturday, June 22, 11 am – 12:30 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center. Registration Required

WILDLIFE WEDNESDAYS
Wednesdays, June 26, July 31, August 28, September 25, 5 – 7 pm, Prairie’s Edge Wildlife Drive

FOREST BATHING
Saturday, August 17, 8 am – 11 am, Black Bear Loop, Oak Savanna Trail System; slow sensory walk for ages 18+, Registration Required

BIRD WALKS
Saturday, August 24, 8 am – 10 am, Blue Hill Trail, Registration Required
Saturday, September 7, 8 am – 10 am, Mahnomen Trail, Registration Required

WILDFLOWER WALKS
Saturday, August 31, 10 am – 12 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center, Registration Required
Saturday, September 14, 11 am – 12:30 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center, Registration Required

WILDLIFE FESTIVAL
Saturday, September 28, 10 am – 2 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center

SANDHILL CRANE TOURS*
October 17, 19, 24, 26, and 30, 6:30 am – 9 am, Oak Savanna Learning Center, Registration Required

SANDHILL CRANE TOUR*
Friday, November 1, 4:30 pm – 6:30 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center, Registration Required

* Registration for crane tours will open on September 17 and must be done by emailing sherburne@fws.gov or by calling 763-389-3323.

Stay tuned for information about refuge events and updates:
Friends Facebook page, facebook.com/SherburneRefugeFans or website, ExploreSherburne.org