

PRAIRIE'S EDGE

A NEWSLETTER FROM FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

SUMMER 2022

300-Plus Species

Native Forbs
Being Restored
Across the Mosaic
of Refuge Habitat

Story by Bruce Ellingson

Do the pasqueflowers draw you to the trails at Oak Savanna Learning Center as winter recedes? Or do you patiently await the late spring meadow of lupine at the south turn of the Wildlife Drive? Of course, you don't have to choose. You can have it all here at the refuge.

The history of what is now called Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge (SNWR) often begins with the date of its establishment in 1965, when the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission approved purchase of the sandplains of the St. Francis River Valley with Federal Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp funds.

Today, 57 years later, these sandplains offer refuge to 200-plus species of birds but also more than 300 species of native wildflowers. When it was acquired, the 30,700-acre refuge was a mosaic of sandy farm
Continued on Page 7

Seed Collecting

Volunteers Essential to Restoration Projects

Story and Photos

By Bruce Ellingson

Plants migrate. Poison ivy has white berries. Hawks carry off snakes three times their length. The joy of collecting native plant seeds with your grandchildren is contagious.

These are lessons three seed collectors have learned in their sum total of 49 years collecting seeds of native wildflowers at Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge. Come join April, Robin, and Mitchell and their adventures behind the gates of the refuge.

It's early May as I write this story. Cold, wet and windy and, yet, at the refuge, pasqueflowers are in bloom, eagles are feeding young, and seed collectors are beginning to

flag this year's crop of native plants.

They follow a directive from refuge headquarters. There's **The List** of 67 native plants that biological technician Kris Spaeth of the US Fish & Wildlife Service wants volunteers to target as they explore behind the gates of
Continued on Page 6



Giving Is Easy

If You Plan It

By Steve Chesney, Friends President

In our last issue I discussed reasons to give to the Friends of Sherburne and how that giving helps future generations enjoy nature at the refuge. Now I'd like to discuss ways to give, both casual and formal.

Gifts can be as casually or as

formally structured as you like. It's easy to renew your membership on a website like GiveMN.org or while you shop for fun items at our nature store, but it can be even easier. With a little planning and a few steps of setup, you can initiate future gifts that happen with no more effort on your part. GiveMN.org will even let you establish a timed, recurring donation: "Set it and forget it."

If you shop at certain websites,
Continued on Page 2



Continued from Page 1

the site will donate a small amount to the Friends at no cost to you. I personally use the “Amazon Smile” program by shopping at “smile.amazon.com.” Every few months that vendor sends “free money” to the Friends on behalf of me and a few other members. Other members use iGive.com at retail websites to find their free money. Links to these programs can be found on the Friends’ website “Donate” page.

When I turned 70½ years old, another method became available. I now can give “Qualified Charitable Distributions” (QCD).

These gifts flow directly from my IRA to any eligible non-profit (such as the Friends). The advantage to me is that I can see tax savings while still using my full standard deduction.

When I turn 72, I can also use QCDs as part of my annual “Required Minimum Distribution” (RMD). Please **Steve Chesney** speak to your tax advisor or brokerage before using this technique.



A more purposive gesture, one to reflect your life and your values, is a legacy gift. This will support the refuge, nature education, and habitat going forward on your behalf. In considering a legacy gift, it’s important to think about how you want your loved ones to be taken care of after you are gone and then decide on a gift to support the refuge through the Friends. It’s a great way to be remembered.

Your accountant, financial planner, and/or attorney can guide you to the best vehicle and tax advantages that may be available for you. But first,

think about your goals, then consider how and when you’d like to give:

- **Give now.** Ways to give include cash, check, credit card, appreciated stock, cars, real estate, IRA Required Minimum Distributions (RMDs), Qualified Charitable Distributions (as noted above), and Donor Advised Funds.

- **Give later.** Includes bequests, wills, remainder trusts, life insurance, beneficiary designations, transfer-on-death deeds.

- **Give and receive.** Includes charitable remainder trusts and charitable gift annuities.

Our partner, the Initiative Foundation in Little Falls, MN (www.IFoundGiving.org), can work with you to make your chosen giving option a reality. Your donation, large or small, is important to us, and we, as an all-volunteer organization, work hard to deliver the greatest impact for your gift. Partnering with the Foundation makes what might otherwise require research and planning much easier.

Would you like more details? We would be pleased to share more details over coffee or a phone call—just let us know. Whether you choose to support the annual fund or leave a legacy, we believe we can offer the right option for you. We sincerely thank you for your support.

More about our mission and how you can help can be found at our website: ExploreSherburne.org.

Check out “About Friends,” “Support,” and “Donate” pages. You can also contact me at friendsofsherburne@gmail.com with any questions.

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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

Prescribed Fire: Just What The Doctor Ordered

By Steve Karel, Project Leader

Happy springtime, Friends! It has been a very unusual spring this year with weather that has presented challenges for our springtime habitat management goals. We use many tools to manage our different habitat types. One of the tools we find most valuable in the spring is prescribed fire. Prescribed fire is just that, a prescription (Rx). Just as the doctor prescribes medication

for a medical condition to make the patient better, we prescribe a controlled fire to make the wildlife habitat better. But before we can light a match, we must make elaborate plans to ensure that an

Rx fire will not only have positive benefits to the habitat but, more importantly, can be conducted safely.

Our Rx plans (burn plans) have very strict parameters in place to make sure the Rx fire is conducted in a safe manner to prevent a fire escaping to become a wildfire. It isn't only the flame that we must be concerned about. We also need to do proper smoke management to prevent excessive smoke from crossing roads and potentially leading to a vehicle accident. We have a specific plan for each burn unit, and that plan goes through extensive agency review with final approvals on the day of the burn. After completing a Go/No-Go checklist to ensure weather conditions and all specific requirements in the plan are met, we do a test fire, and if flame and smoke are not acting properly, the fire is put out and the burn is not con-



Steve Karel, Project Leader

ducted. Some of the most important parameters that need to be considered, both on the day of the fire as well as on the days following, are wind direction, wind speed, temperature, relative humidity, and availability and need for personnel and specialized equipment. The burn plan also includes a contingency plan. The contingency plan provides information that allows the fire crew to respond and control a wildfire if one should develop during the prescribed fire, so everyone is prepared to respond to any situation. In addition to a detailed burn plan, we are fortunate to have an elite crew of highly qualified firefighters. Most of the Sherburne NWR staff are "red-carded," meaning they meet the qualifications as federal wildland firefighters. All wildland firefighters go through extensive training and meet physical requirements annually to hold this credential. Many of our staff also assist with wildfires throughout the United States annually.

Rx fire has multiple benefits to our landscape. It allows us to reduce hazardous fuels that come from dead and downed trees. By conducting a burn in a controlled setting, we can reduce the potential for extreme wildfires that can jeopardize surrounding homes and human lives. We also use fire to reduce invasive plants

that can threaten native plant communities. Fire helps many native plants, like bur oaks, to do better by reducing non-native competition. Bur oaks have evolved to be fire tolerant while many non-native species have not. With our primary habitat being oak savanna, fire plays an important role by recycling



Refuge wildland firefighters complete final prescribed fire of the year.

nutrients back into the soils and promoting growth of trees, wildflowers, and grasses.

In an ideal year with favorable conditions, the refuge will conduct several Rx fires that typically add up to 2,500 to 5,000 acres. Unfortunately, with the wet and windy spring we have had this year, we have not had the "window of opportunity" and have burned fewer than 100 acres. Once grass and trees green up, it is very hard to implement an Rx fire. As you can tell, it is extremely challenging to get all of the stars to align perfectly to implement this important habitat management tool.

Stay Wild, My Friends!



Princeton Fourth-Graders Study Nature Indoors and Outdoors

Volunteers—including Sue Hix (left) and Carol Mertesdorf—hosted Princeton students in May, their first field trip in 2 years. First item was to review the basics: What is a wildlife refuge, a naturalist, a habitat—and what is phenology? Not easy questions? No problem for these students!



Cody Carlstrom



Dr. Cynthia McSherry



Jack Gburzynski

20 Nests & 10 Active Pairs in 2022

Watching the Bald Eagle Population Soar

Story and photos by Bruce Ellingson

If you are a person of a certain age, you remember a time when the sighting of a bald eagle was a memorable moment. Dr. Cynthia McSherry, who grew up on the Whitefish Chain and graduated from Pequot Lakes High School, had just such an “I remember when” experience when as a high school teenager she saw her first bald eagle. In the late 1960s there were fewer than 500 breeding pair in the lower 48 states.

You remember, too, when DDT was banned in 1972. The widely used pesticide, when ingested, prevented eagles from reproducing successfully by weakening the birds’ eggshells. A year later the Endangered Species Act was signed into law with bald eagles included on that species list. Bald eagle populations have gradually recovered, and bald eagles were removed from the Endangered Species List in 2007.

A recent U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) survey found there are more than 70,000 breeding pair in the contiguous 48 states. (<https://www.fws.gov/library/collections/bald-and-golden-eagle-management>)

This history probably had something to do with the efforts by the USFWS to count eagles at Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge (SNWR). According to refuge wildlife biologist Cody Carlstrom, the refuge began counting nesting pairs in 1983. It was a short count: one nest; one nesting pair.

Today, the refuge numbers reflect the national success of bald eagle recovery. Reports Carlstrom, “we’re at 20 nests and 10 active pairs.” However, in 2017 “the refuge had 19 nests and 17 active pairs with almost every nest active with a breeding pair,” he adds.

And how successful have the breeding pairs been? Since the counting began in 1983, “260 eaglets have fledged and every year we see an increase in nests,” says the wildlife biologist.

Which brings us to the work of Dr. Cynthia McSherry, Jack Gburzynski, and a half-dozen other volunteers who, with spotting scopes and clip boards...and sometimes

PAGE 4

snowshoes...record the weekly nesting activities of bald eagles at the refuge from February through July. Active nests need protection from prescribed fires. These volunteer members of “The Eagle Watch Program” answer the following questions: Is the nest active? Is the pair incubating eggs? Have eaglets successfully hatched? How many eaglets successfully fledge?

And if data collecting was the sole experience of eagle watching, this is where the story would end... However, there’s more to the story than the data recorded at “Blue Hill Pool #2.”

Eagle nests at SNWR are named, i.e., “Blue Hill Pool,” and the number indicates that the current perch is of a succession of nests in one area and probably home to the same nesting pair. Eagles tend to return to their nests year after year. Nests at the refuge are numbered as high as #10, but when you talk to eagle watchers, all nests are talked about the same way. They are referred to as “my nest,” this offered in a rather possessive tone.

“40th Street #2” is one of Jack Gburzynski’s nests. Gburzynski grew up in Duluth, MN, tromping the boreal forests in search of snowy and great grey owls, and that childhood love of nature—he has an undergraduate minor in biology—led him to volunteer at the refuge after his retirement from the U.S. Postal Service. Gburzynski became a volunteer rover on the Wildlife Drive in 2009 and has been an eagle watcher for about eight years.

The watch program kicks off February 21, but veterans may begin earlier, watching the nest for nest building, as Gburzynski does. He parks and scopes, usually often and long enough to observe an actual mating, and “you can generally count on an egg about three days after.” Then it’s another 34-36 days to hatch, days given over to watching the pair exchanging nesting duties.

“It’s about this time of year (mid-April), weather permitting, that you can look through your scope and witness a little gray downy head sticking up and a mother eagle bending to give it some food, and that depends on how deep that nest is—or how shallow it is—that you have a view,” says Gburzynski.

Eagle watchers know that best viewing is pre-foilage. But pre-foilage can mean cold temps in a car with the window open looking through a 40-power scope at a bundle of branches half a mile away, just watching “my nest.”

One year, Gburzynski’s nest had hatched two eaglets. They were “fully feathered in brown” when wind took the tree down. The nest on the ground was obscured from view. Gburzynski reported the collapse, certain the eaglets were developed enough to have glided to the ground. A returning parent persuaded him that they



were being fed. In eight years of watching, he’s seen four successful hatchings.

After leaf out, it’s difficult to see more than the comings and goings of parents. You’ll witness “the parents dropping off a duck or ground animal,” reports Gburzynski. Fledge occurs at about 12 weeks, and then the watch is over. Until then, the parents, if not at the nest, are watching from nearby, protectively.

Gburzynski’s never-to-be-forgotten moment came when he was watching an eagle’s nest from a quarter of a mile away, close enough, he hoped, to get pictures of an expected fledge when “the mother eagle took exception to me on that particular day and actually raised up into the sky, did a couple circles, and then dive-bombed me. Really!” he recalled. “With her talons out and screaming!

“That was amazing!” Gburzynski says eagle watching is about “having patience and learning and, over time,

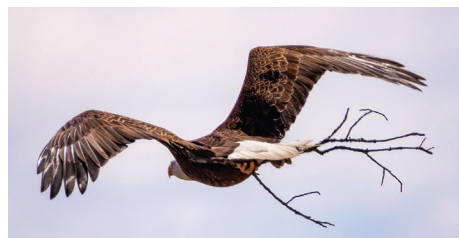
caring about what you’re watching. It’s all natural and it’s all playing out in front of you.”

Which returns us to Dr. Cynthia McSherry. Her eagle watching count: one nest; one pair; no apparent parenthood. The retired pediatrician began her volunteering at the refuge shortly after completing the Minnesota Master Naturalist Program. Helping at the 2019 Fall Festival led to teaching in the nature education program and, eventually, to joining the Eagle Watch Program this year.

Hers is “Blue Hill Pool #2.” She began her weekly nest watch in February. An opening in the trees permitted her to glimpse the nest east from County Road 5, but serious record-keeping required a hike east from CR 5 along a service



This pair of refuge eagles spent spring working on a nest they didn’t occupy. Not unusual say eagle watchers, who believe the birds are preparing for possible loss of a nest.



road to the nest. Snowshoes permitted her to forge a path through fresh snow. Her tracks mingled with turkey tracks (“many!”), canids (perhaps a fox and pretty certainly a wolf track “bigger than 4 inches”), feline tracks (likely a bobcat), and an otter slide.

But no eagles...until Good Friday! “It was a good Friday...it was a Great Friday!” she recalls. As she neared the nest that April 15th there was a pair of eagles, “one standing on the nest and the other circling overhead.” But the two weeks that followed showed no further activity, and then on Saturday, April 30, she spotted an immature bald eagle at the nest. “And I thought ‘this is not good, that eagle doesn’t belong there.’” By early May, Dr. McSherry had concluded the nest was abandoned.

The doctor admitted to being saddened by the failed nest and yet she confided, “I know that it’s something I want to continue to do. As I was walking in and walking back out this morning, I saw a young deer. I saw a couple of turkeys. I’m pretty sure I heard a screech owl. I heard some cranes.

“Besides the fact that I truly love the eagles, eagle watching gives me an opportunity to walk where other people don’t get to walk during sanctuary time. Even though I don’t abuse it, I treasure that privilege.”

Volunteers Essential to Habitat Restoration

Continued from Page 1

areas designated as wildlife sanctuary. In April and May, collectors place a flag, or record GPS coordinates into an app, or just add a note to memory banks: Return to THIS location once summer sunlight, warmth, and rain have produced the precious seeds of native forbs.

These plant spotters are returning to the refuge as you read this and will continue to return this summer and fall. Amidst the undergrowth, they'll spot prairie larkspur and five kinds of blazing star, plus another dozen or two prairie wildflower natives.

Bags in hand, they pick half a plant's seed production, while dodging poison ivy, slapping away deer flies, but also stopping with a grandchild in the quiet of a refuge morning to deeply breathe in the rich licorice aroma of the blue giant hyssop.

USFWS Note: Seed collection is allowed only by refuge volunteers and staff. Visitors MAY NOT collect seeds or plants on the refuge.

Robin DeLong, a charter member of the Friends of Sherburne, has been collecting seeds since before there was a formal seed collecting program. She remembers a time in the 1990s when children under the direction of refuge operations specialist Tim Loose would pretend to be buffalo, walking the prairie with pockets of lupine seed picked by Loose, which they'd scatter and stomp into the soil with their boots, buffalo-style. Robin leads the "east side" collecting team.

April St. Aoro brought her daughter to the refuge on a bird tour in 2001, where they witnessed a pair of bull snakes mating in the road. She was hooked for what's become a 20-plus

year commitment, including seed collecting since 2003.

April took Mitchell Elness under her wing in 2017. "That's how it started and that's how it is today," he says. Technically they co-lead the "west side" collecting team, which includes two of his grandchildren.



Seed Collector team leaders (from left) Robin DeLong, Mitchell Elness and April St. Aoro.

SEED COLLECTION "HOW TO'S"

Robin, April, and Mitchell met this reporter at refuge headquarters in late April for an interview, which is why in some cases you'll hear them finishing each other's sentences. April and Mitchell were already flagging pasqueflowers on the west side "because if you don't find the pasqueflowers when they're blooming, you will not find them at all, they're like larkspur, impossible to spot after blossoms disappear," according to April.

The work of "mapping" doesn't always require the plant to be in bloom. Some plants are readily visible to these veterans regardless of their current life cycle stage. Collection can begin as early as May and continue as late as deer hunting season. And, in November, Mitchell says, "when the snow is flying it's time to clean the seed."

According to Mitchell, seed collectors pick a place "where we think we're going to collect and then we adapt, because sometimes we don't find what we are looking for, or what we find isn't what we thought we were looking for!" Adds Robin, "plants migrate."

April can identify plants by their seeds but will bring a book to the field with pictures of all the different stages of plants. "And you still end up with people who've been out here for many years saying, 'Is this what I'm looking for?'" she admits.

"Usually, you collect not more than half of what's on the plant," says Mitchell. "Collect half in the bag and then we would gather back at the car and combine our bags with same species of seeds."

They check the seeds into the check-in kiosk, log their finds, record flowers they found to be in bloom, and the names of volunteers. And that's the hand-off to Kris Spaeth, USFWS biological technician, who moves the not-yet-cleaned seeds to climate-controlled storage for cleaning in October or November.

One lesson novice seed collectors learn is that effort doesn't always equal production. "It wasn't intuitive," Mitchell says. "I had to learn that a little plastic bag of stuff that looked like almost nothing is of great value because it's hard to find...as opposed to when you get a whole field full of beebalm that you can stand up and fill 10 buckets. That's rewarding but the small amounts need attention, too."

The three leaders encourage anyone interested in volunteer seed collecting to jump in for a day to try it out. In 2019, when seed collector volunteers were in full swing, there were 709 volunteer seed-collecting hours.

"Volunteering doesn't have to be just a job," says Mitchell. "There has to be some fun. I've learned some really crazy stuff," he admits. "April pointed out that almost newborn wild turkeys can fly even before they've fledged. And we've witnessed hawks flying away with snakes three to four times the length of their bodies.

"These kinds of things...they're joyful and they're rewarding. They have nothing to do with collecting seeds other than the only reason we saw it is because we were seed collectors."

For anyone interested in seed collecting, please contact bio-tech Kris Spaeth at kris_spaeth@fws.gov or call 763-389-3323 x106.

Visitor Services

Experiencing Sherburne for The First Time

By Jade Pederson,
Visitor Services Corpsmember

Before making the move up north, I was born and raised in western Iowa, the Loess Hills, and went to college at the University of Iowa to receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Policy and Planning as well as a minor in Environmental Science. In January of this year, I got the opportunity to begin a 12-month Conservation Corps Minnesota and Iowa service term at Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge as a Visitor Services Corpsmember.

When driving into the refuge for the first time on that cold, January day, all I saw was white. Snow and aspen bleached the landscape, making it seem limitless. I had an idea of what was underneath the blanket of

snow and ice, but I could not imagine then the changes I see now as the refuge starts to shift seasons.

While I waited for the air to warm and the sun to make an appearance, I worked mostly at Sherburne's headquarters – interacting with visitors, creating nature education materials, and coordinating volunteers. Soon there was an opening to explore the refuge with our Wildlife Biologist.

There was a reported sighting of a deceased bald eagle, and it was our duty to find it and send it in. I was getting the chance to explore the refuge in its winter state! We crossed over an ice-covered wetland and into the most pristine oak savanna habitat I had ever seen. There, we found the bald eagle. I recognized on our 45-minute snowshoe hike back to the truck that I would have the opportunity to witness something truly special during my



Jade Pederson

year service term. I would get to see the refuge transform into the sanctuary that so many migratory birds, deer, coyote, gophers, and even our national bird gets to call home.

Since then, I have made it a point to notice the small changes each day. While working on a sandhill crane presentation in March, I saw my first sandhill crane. Then, at the end of the month when I completed my in-field wildland firefighter training and tests, I could see the refuge's soil for the first time. In April and preparing for the City Nature Challenge BioBlitz, spring bird tours, and the Spring Celebration, I noticed that there was totally open water on many of the wetlands. During the first week of May, I spotted the first pasqueflowers of the season while leading nature education tours for 4th graders. Now, Sherburne is in full bloom with returning plants, animals, and even events, after 2 years with restrictions.

This service term has given me opportunities to experience the refuge and nature in such special ways. Throughout the rest of my term, I hope to continue to learn about this land during its constant and magnificent transformation.

Native Wildflowers Diversify Landscape

Continued from Page 1

fields, prairie, oak savanna, oak forest, and wetlands. According to Kris Spaeth, early upland habitat restoration on the refuge started with the seeding of native grasses into the fallow crop fields. "The big four: big blue, little blue, Indian, switch" were some of the first, says Spaeth, who is a biological science technician for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Although no longer present in many areas across the refuge, native forbs could still be found in the ditch banks, along the edges of woodlands and wetlands, and in farmyard areas little disturbed over time.

According to Spaeth, who's been at the refuge since 2012, one of the original Johnny Appleseeds of prairie restoration at SNWR was Tim Loose, USFWS operations specialist. Loose was among those who observed the lack of a healthy, diverse plant community. Like those others, he'd pocket seeds as he moved about the refuge and empty his pockets at prime restoration



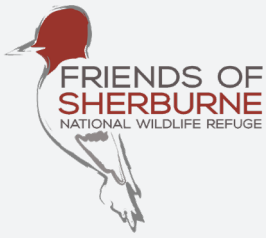
Kris Spaeth

locations elsewhere.

Loose held a meeting in May of 1995, inviting the public to the Old School House to promote a community garden of native plants. Spaeth and volunteer Robin DeLong both identify this meeting as a moment when an organized effort at establishing native forbs began in earnest. Loose's efforts led to the formation of a group of volunteers who collected native forb seed across the refuge.

Local seed collection continues today because native forb seed is expensive and local ecotype seed is prized. "Local plants are adapted to the conditions that exist here, whether it's the soil type, the soil moisture, the precipitation, [or] the temperatures. These plants know how to survive and thrive here," says Spaeth, who supervises the volunteers who collect native forb seeds for continuing refuge restoration. **USFWS Note: Seed collection is allowed only by refuge volunteers and staff. Visitors MAY NOT collect seeds or plants on the refuge.**

In 1999, early in the formal seed collecting effort, seed collectors produced 18 and a half pounds of cleaned native forb seed representing 19 species. In 2013, their most successful year, collectors gathered 37 species for a total of 143 and a half pounds. Spaeth acknowledges, "That was a boom year!" The market value of that collection was pegged at more than \$43,000, all of which would go back to refuge land.



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

UPCOMING EVENTS

As of this writing in late May, refuge facilities are open, and we just hosted a very successful Spring Celebration at the Oak Savanna Learning Center. Assuming that COVID remains at acceptable levels, fall and winter events with a “post-COVID” look will be planned and announced.

For event information and refuge updates:

- **Friends Facebook page**, facebook.com/SherburneRefugeFans
- **Friends e-news, the *Prairie Insider***. *Not a subscriber yet?* Sign up by typing your email address in the space at the bottom of the Friends website home page, [ExploreSherburne.org](https://www.exploresherburne.org).
- **Refuge website**, fws.gov/refuge/sherburne
- **For a list of videos from past refuge virtual events**, see the Friends Facebook page, facebook.com/SherburneRefugeFans/videos.

Shop at the Eagle’s Nest Nature Store!

- In-person at the Oak Savanna Learning Center, Thursdays and Saturdays, 10:00 am – 2:00 pm
- Online at SherburneEaglesNestStore.com

Sherburne Photography Club

- Meets the second Wednesday of the month at the Oak Savanna Learning Center, 6:30 pm social time, 7:00 pm meeting and program
- Meeting and activity details available on the club’s Facebook page, facebook.com/groups/Sherburne-PhotoClub