

**Friends of Sherburne  
Annual Meeting (ZOOM FORMAT)  
Thursday, Jan. 13, 6:30 pm**

The Friends of Sherburne Annual Meeting WILL NOT BE IN-PERSON. The agenda is as follows:

- Introductions
- 2021 Accomplishments & Reports
- What's Coming in 2022
- Vote to Approve 2022 Budget
- Refuge Update
- Election of Board Members

The complete 2022 Meeting Agenda and unapproved minutes from the 2021 Annual Meeting are available online at [exploresherburne.org/about-friends](http://exploresherburne.org/about-friends) or by calling 763-389-3323. Requests must be made by December 31.

**Format:** Zoom Video Meeting and Conference

**Call:** Link and logins will be provided in the Prairie Insider e-news.

**Call-in Only Option:** 1 (408) 638 0968

**Meeting ID:** 284 300 6080

**Participant number,** press #

**Passcode:** 816213



**Ceann Yang**

**Ceann Yang  
Scholarship Recipient**

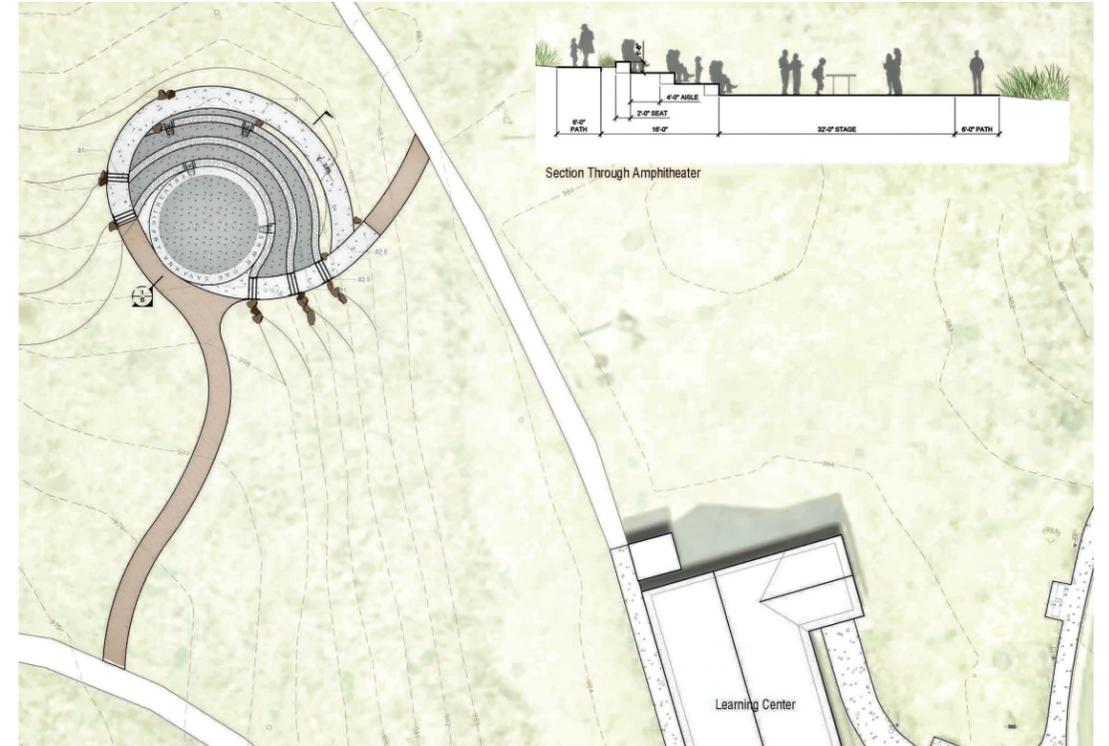
We are pleased to announce the first Friends of Sherburne NWR Diversity Scholarship has been awarded to Ceann Yang, a second-year biology major at St. Cloud State University. The scholarship is intended to encourage students of diverse backgrounds to pursue the sciences in the areas of biology, ecology, natural resources, and environmental studies. Growing up in St. Paul, Yang has always been interested in how life works, and she developed a love for biology and nature after joining a high school biology club. Yang says it gave her new insight about how nature can improve your mindset, cleanse your mind, and reduce stress – just by taking in fresh air!

# PRAIRIE'S EDGE

A NEWSLETTER FROM FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

**WINTER 2021**

## AMPHITHEATER Taking Education Outdoors



View above the Oak Savanna Learning Center with proposed amphitheater upper left and sketch of seating upper right. Design and drawing by Damon Farber Landscape Architects.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

Though many COVID-19 restrictions remain in place at this writing in mid-October, Refuge Headquarters is now open weekly Wednesday through Friday, 10 am – 4 pm. The outdoor-accessible restrooms at the Oak Savanna Learning Center are also open, but the Learning Center itself remains closed for student visits, meetings, and events. However, the Friends Eagle's Nest Nature Store is open there from 10 am – 2 pm on Thursdays and Saturdays, at least through the holiday shopping season. Online shopping and curbside merchandise pick-up options also remain available via the online shopping site at [SherburneEaglesNestStore.com](http://SherburneEaglesNestStore.com).

No in-person refuge events are being planned at this time, but please take advantage of the following resources for updates and your viewing pleasure in the meantime:

- Friends website events page: [ExploreSherburne.org/events](http://ExploreSherburne.org/events)
- Events Calendar on the refuge website: [fws.gov/refuge/Sherburne/visit/events\\_calendar.html](http://fws.gov/refuge/Sherburne/visit/events_calendar.html)
- Friends Facebook page: [facebook.com/sherburnerefugefans](https://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](http://ExploreSherburne.org)
- Videos from past virtual events on topics including wildflowers, fall birds, photography tips, bats, and more on the Friends Facebook page: [facebook.com/sherburnerefugefans/videos](https://facebook.com/sherburnerefugefans/videos)

**Thursday, January 13, 2022, 6:30 pm**

Plan to attend the Friends Annual Meeting via Zoom.

**Mid-January 2022**

Check the refuge website's Just for Kids page for information and entry form for the 2022 Youth Photography Contest. K - 12 students can get a jump on their 2022 entry by getting out to the refuge this winter to capture photos of animal tracks, frost decorating foliage, the glitter of the snow, or winter scenes that inspire the imagination.

(Hint: Very few winter photos are normally entered in competition!)

## Educational and Interpretive Programming Is Focus

**By Bruce Ellingson**

Imagine a visitor center, perhaps attached to the Oak Savanna Learning Center, as a first stop at Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge: "The main entry point for information and for that initial exploration of the refuge," as Visitor Services Manager Alaina Larkin describes it.

Larkin imagines a newcomer to the refuge browsing the visitor center and then walking out the back door to the prairie trails...and, perhaps, to

an interpretive program in an amphitheater snuggled into the hillside just outside the center's back door.

Working with U.S. Fish & Wildlife staff from Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, the Friends of Sherburne have a vision for the next feature in the Oak Savanna Learning Center educational and interpretive complex: An amphitheater.

Located just yards below the Learning Center, an amphitheater would permit the Friends, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and their partners to stage more immersive educational and interpretive programming out in the fresh air.

The amphitheater would offer outdoor sanctuary for humans in a wildlife-oriented refuge without interfering with the natural flow of the oak savanna, prairie, and wetlands, nor impeding the panoramic vista

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## Giving to Refuge; It is Personal

**By Steve Chesney,  
Friends President**

It's late fall, and the changing of the season will bring you annual donation requests from many worthy organizations.

The Friends of Sherburne is asking too, in this, our year-end campaign mailing.

There are lots of great reasons to give. You may give to the Friends because you support our mission, or because we're a 501(c)3

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nonprofit organization where a donation is potentially tax deductible, or because much of the money we raise is spent locally. But for me, it's personal. Nature is a source of recreation, contemplation, and inspiration. Sherburne Refuge and the Friends are a way for me to focus that and so I volunteer and donate.

I'm in the boomer generation and growing up I was more than fortunate to have places and people to open my eyes and develop my knowledge of nature – how to get around in it and how to enjoy it.

I grew up in urban areas, but they weren't all that "unwild." I was able to explore sand dunes and creek bottoms on a walk from my house. In summer I took weekend trips with my parents to a summer cabin in Wright County. Boy Scouts taught me camping and hiking in the woods.

It was natural that as an adult and parent, I worked with scouting and took many trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and a lot of national parks and a few wildlife refuges. As my hunting and fishing buddies aged out, I found birder friends kind enough to teach me birdwatching and I found Sherburne to be a wonderful place at all times of the year for that. It's a collision of the western tallgrass prairie and hardwood forest habitats plus this rare and weird in-between called oak savanna. Prairie and woodland birds (and flowers and mammals) abound.

As you can see, I was privileged and

lucky to get to the places and be with the right people, and it has provided me with lifelong joy. Many of my past places are now urbanized and I can't thank all those folks who helped me. But I can "pay it forward" by helping to conserve and restore the remaining bits of land with opportunities for individual and group activities.

By donating to the Friends, I can help provide transportation and nature experiences for those who through accident of birth or residence have no opportunity to visit wild areas nor someone to help them learn to see the wonder.

Through the Friends, I can support the refuge staff with physical improvement projects. Here are a few examples. Check out the new kiosks and picnic tables at the first stop on the Wildlife Drive. You might also notice new bur oak tree plantings on the refuge, with growth tubes provided by the Friends. The Friends also support the refuge by advocating for increased funding at the national level which supports the refuge as a whole.

A donation also supports partner schools and other organizations. The Friends provide transportation for students and equipment and materials for volunteers to guide nature education programs for local 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders and other ages. Often this is the only opportunity for some children to interact with nature in a welcoming way. We also partner with organizations of minority communities that may otherwise feel unwelcome or unsafe in wild areas.

I hope you can find your "pay it forward" reason and will help us in our mission. It's easy! Please find enclosed a preaddressed stamped envelope or you can donate online at [www.GiveMN.org/organization/Friends-Of-Sherburne-National-Wildlife-Refuge](http://www.GiveMN.org/organization/Friends-Of-Sherburne-National-Wildlife-Refuge)

**More about the mission can be found at [About Friends](http://AboutFriends.org) | [Friends of Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge](http://FriendsOfSherburne.org) ([exploresherburne.org](http://exploresherburne.org)) or contact me at [friendsofsherburne@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofsherburne@gmail.com) with any questions.**

## Taking Nature (Education) to Elementary School Students

### Shifting Gears for Education

By Alaina Larkin,  
Visitor Services Manager

The last refuge-led field trips took place in winter 2020, and as the 2021 school year began we were hopeful that the changing of colors, calls of migrating birds, and comfortable



Alaina Larkin

weather would be accompanied by the sounds of students exploring the trails around the Oak Savanna Learning Center. With COVID-19 statistics worsening by early August, refuge volunteer Sue Hix and I brainstormed alternatives that would allow refuge volunteers to connect with the students, while providing a plan that 'likely' wouldn't be cancelled. Talking to the principals at Princeton Intermediate and Zimmerman Elementary, the schools with which the refuge currently partners, they agreed that offsite field trips were a gamble for the fall, especially when taking into account student safety and the logistics of busing. Instead, the refuge would focus on outdoor programming in their respective schoolyards for the fall, exploring their natural spaces and taking planning one season at a time.

Refuge volunteers Sue Hix and Carol Mertesdorf stepped up to co-lead the programming and got to work scouting the locations and



Journal entry by Logan Robinson



Journal entry by Claire Dickenson



Traveling Nature Education Team Dean Kleinhans, Carol Mertesdorf, and Sue Hix use "habitat hoops" to define a space to explore nature's wonders. Below are journal entries made by Zimmerman Elementary School student naturalists.

looking critically at the lesson plans. They got to know Princeton's prairie and wooded habitats, along with Zimmerman's oak savanna habitat (and even got elbow-deep in some weeding!).

The standards-based curricula were tweaked to fit the different spaces, with 2<sup>nd</sup> graders focusing on using their senses – eyesight, hearing, smell, and touch – and 4<sup>th</sup> graders comparing differences and similarities between two different habitats. About

450 students were able to learn a little bit about the refuge and practice skills that they'll use during winter and spring programming. They had the advantage of being the "experts" while exploring familiar spaces, potentially through a different lens. Furthermore, we hope that their teachers feel a little more comfortable using these natural areas in the future.

We hope to welcome students to the refuge for their winter or spring field trips. Until then, we'll go to them!



Journal entry by Kylee Schmitz

**FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NWR  
2021 BOARD OF DIRECTORS**  
Steven Chesney – President  
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Amy Minzel – Director  
BearPaw Shields – Director  
Scott Suhsen – Director

**LIAISONS TO THE BOARD**  
Steve Karel – Refuge Manager  
Alaina Larkin – Visitor Services

**Donate or Join  
Friends of Sherburne  
Online at [ExploreSherburne.org](http://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](mailto:FriendsofSherburne@gmail.com)

## AMPHITHEATER

# Fresh-Air Programming Among Our Wild Residents

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from above School House Pool. Today, from the Learning Center, you can watch the sunset over School House Pool while viewing much of the visitor activity on the two-mile-plus trail system.

The amphitheater would permit a similar view of the refuge from an outdoor vantage point without restricting current activity or viewing opportunities. As Larkin points out, "The amphitheater would not be built up from the ground but built into the hillside."

Minimal excavation would be required, and users will nestle inside the hollow of this elbow of existing space facing southwest: Oaks rustling to the near north, School House Pool beyond to the west, and a sweep of prairie connecting the view between.

According to Friends immediate past president Myrna Krueger, planning for an amphitheater began in June of 2020. Site visits and research included Prairie Wetlands Learning Center in Fergus Falls and Springbrook Nature Center in Fridley.



Myrna Krueger

Refuge Project Leader Steve Karel has been talking about outdoor programming space for several years, according to Krueger. Alaina Larkin had experienced the possibilities of outdoor programming in Fergus Falls, where she interned at Prairie Wetlands, and was quick to advocate for the idea here.

Karel is a supporter of the

outdoor classroom. "I think the purpose of an amphitheater would be to give visitors a place to sit to enjoy the outdoors and also to host events and activities that we do at the refuge—basically, to expand that indoor classroom.

"From my perspective we come to the refuge to get out onto the refuge and not necessarily sit inside a classroom. Obviously in Minnesota you don't have 12 months of the year where you can comfortably do that, but an amphitheater would nicely connect to the Learning Center, or potentially a visitor center, to allow both outside and indoor experiences."

The three-tiered amphitheater will be 75-90 feet in diameter, have seating for 100 but standing viewing for more, and be accessible for families pushing strollers or nature-lovers using wheelchairs or walkers.

"As one individual who oversees a public use program, I'm really excited for the possibilities," says Larkin. "The community would benefit from additional programming targeted towards families, elementary-aged students, and adults. Our current hitch has just been capacity. I see the amphitheater being a great additional venue instead of being packed indoors in the Oak Savanna Learning Center."

Cost of the project is estimated to be \$260,000 with \$200,000 yet to be raised. Krueger reports that the "silent phase" of the fundraising will begin in 2022 with an effort to raise \$100,000 from the committed core of Friends and refuge supporters with a public fundraising effort to follow.

According to Sue Hix, a past board chair who spearheaded the "Be Wild" campaign to raise funds to outfit the Learning Center, the Friends are now seeking an agreement with the USFWS in order to begin their fundraising campaign. She hopes the experience in fundraising for "Be Wild" will help them expedite both the finalization of the fundraising agreement as well as the fundraising itself.

Amphitheater planning has been a "true partnership," says Krueger, who has spearheaded Friends planning. "This is not a 'Friends project' but a 'refuge project.' Staff are involved in the planning every step of the way."

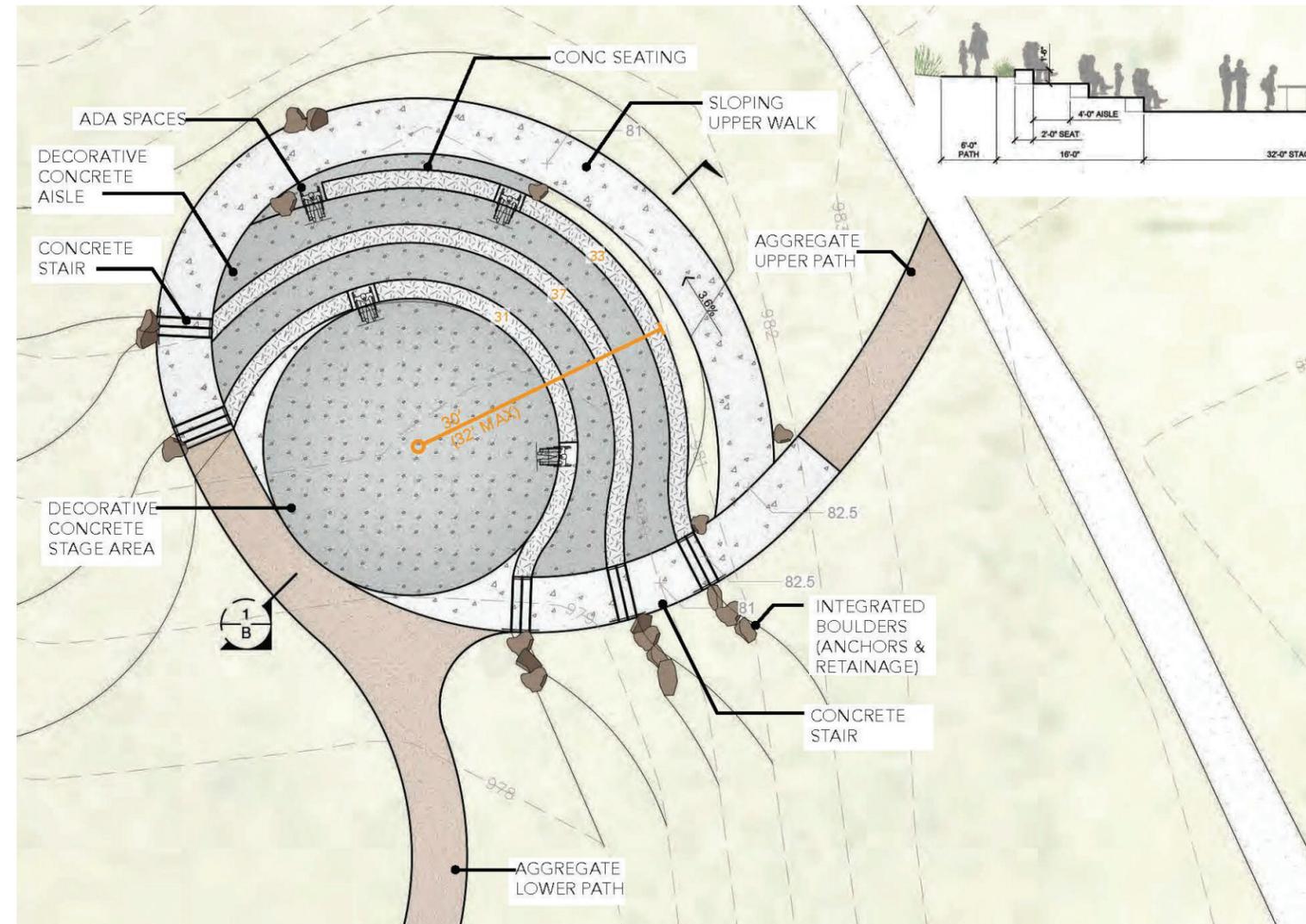
This partnership is essential

because once the amphitheater is complete, the Friends formally turn the facility over to the USFWS, which accepts the responsibility for maintenance as it becomes federal property. "I truly appreciate the partnership that we have with the Friends group," says Project Leader Karel. "We may not

have some of these things if it wasn't for the Friends of Sherburne. Their contributions to that Learning Center and, hopefully, a future visitor center, have been incredible."

"We've been advocating for a visitor center for nearly 25 years, and the USFWS built the refuge a Learning

Center, first. But we are still advocating for a visitor center on the site," said Krueger. "We advocate for it. We don't know when it will happen, but we aren't going to take our foot off that foot-feed. We're very persistent and will keep promoting our vision until it becomes a reality."



View from above the proposed amphitheater site, with seating upper right. Design by Damon Farber Landscape Architects.

## Scott Suhsen Envisioning The Needs of A Community

Scott Suhsen imagines a refuge amphitheater used by Fish & Wildlife staffers for lectures, the kind you might attend in a national park, or by scouts at the beginning or end of a nature outing, or by school children from Princeton, Zimmerman, and beyond. And he notes, "Unless it's something to do with families, I wouldn't get much use of it. And I'm fine with that, my thinking is broader than myself."

Suhsen's a board member who has been involved with the refuge off and on for years for that very reason: his thinking is broader than himself. And the refuge fits his interest and involvement in the larger Princeton-area community.

"I just think the amphitheater is a great opportunity to

do educational programming that an indoor situation cannot do as well. When you start talking about trees and wildlife, it's sure nice to be able to say 'look' instead of explaining it in words. We can't expect our future generations to take care of the environment if they don't know about it," Suhsen points out.

"Rather than a PowerPoint presentation or films or whatever, I think the outdoors is just more real. And I think that's an important thing," says Suhsen. "You know with the different environments that we have visible in the amphitheater, being able to show we have the ponds, we have the

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## Carol Mertesdorf Appreciating The Importance Of Eagles

Carol Mertesdorf went back to school in 2009 to study environmental science after a career in medical laboratory technology. At St. Cloud State University she met a teacher who took the class on field trips. "I was sick the day for Sherburne, so I went out there on my own and thought it was absolutely wonderful, and then I asked to be a volunteer at Sherburne."

Today, she's a refuge nature

educator who knows the power of nature education. Sometimes all it takes is a bird to open one's eyes, she says.

"A while ago we were teaching 5<sup>th</sup>-graders and there was one little boy who was just not into this whole nature thing and he was walking, dragging his feet, had his head back with an 'oh, why do we have to do this' attitude. And as he's doing that he's looking up at the sky and all of a sudden, he stops and goes 'look, there's eagles.' And sure as heck, there were eagles up in the sky and that changed everything."

Mertesdorf is a Friends board member who is certain the amphitheater will be a reality.



Carol Mertesdorf



Longtime Rover Judy Hidde

## Judy Hidde An Amphitheater for the "Squirrels"

Judy Hidde hikes on the refuge trails (and off the trails when permitted). The Oak Savanna Learning Center trail complex is among the favorites of the longtime rover and former board member. "I hike those trails quite often and I'll always spend some time looking at it (the proposed amphitheater site) from different angles, envisioning magical things happening. It's perfect and when I saw the sketches, it far exceeded what I thought they would do. It's beautiful

and yet it just blends in."

Hidde imagines dozens of second-graders ("squirrels") fidgeting about, but being immersed and, finally, entranced by nature. "This is a perfect place for them to congregate to have information presented to them and for them to experience the quietness, and the beauty, and soak in some of what is so special."

She admits, "some are going to be 'squirrels', but you know as they come back, they are going to get older and they are going to remember this. Whether they are 'squirrels' or they are attentive, they are going to take away good things."

They may not remember it was a trumpeter swan that flew overhead right in the middle of their effort to be in the moment, "but they will remember the event. It's an absolutely magical setting," says the longtime volunteer.

And at Wildlife Festival, "I can see Stan Tekiela standing up at the base of this thing, and he captivates an audience, and he plays to those kids, and he's got them wrapped around his finger."

## BearPaw Shields A Legacy for Our Children

BearPaw Shields hopes a refuge amphitheater will be a gift to the future. "I believe in leaving a legacy for the children of the generations to come," says Shields, a Friends of Sherburne board member.

"Our children are our future, and I always think about the quote from Sitting Bull, who said, 'Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.' He always sticks with me actually in everything that I do, whether it's home life or at work or school," says Shields. "Whatever I do I always think about how this is going to affect the children that come after me and their children's children."



BearPaw Shields

Shields is a cultural liaison for Princeton Public Schools and a college student herself. She started as a refuge volunteer with a booth at the Wildlife Festival offering information about Native Americans that resided in the area. Her hopes for the amphitheater project include further opportunities at such education. "WELL! One hope I have for the project is that we get the necessary funding needed to start the project," she says with a laugh.

And then, more seriously, she offers "personally, I would love to be able to host programming about the history of the local Native American tribes (such as the Ojibwe and Dakota) that used to reside here, and have the facility to offer an experience with a drum group and dancers. Every tribe has drum groups that would be able to participate. The amphitheater just feels like it would be such a great place for that sound in nature."

Shields believes nature itself to be a powerful force of energy for people. "Outside," she says, "you get to feel that energy."

And would Hidde want to be sitting there enjoying the moment? "Beyond a doubt, beyond a doubt."

And why might she invest in the project? "Because I'm not going to be around forever, but I want people forever to be able to experience it."

## Carol Mertesdorf

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theater project is an education difference-maker. "It'll be big enough so if there's two classes, you can actually spread them a little bit. If you're sitting outside and you can feel the breeze on your face and you can hear the birds chirping overhead and the wind rustling through the trees, you are just more immersed."

"The refuge is the animals' place," she reminds us, "and we are lucky that we get to come here and appreciate them. The refuge is public land," she adds, "it belongs to all of us really, including the animals, so we need to invest in it."

## Scott Suhsen

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prairie, and we have the woods, showing how those integrate with each other and how they are separate."

Suhsen imagines an educational experience that integrates the classroom with the nature trail. "Both sitting and listening as well as getting out and doing a different listening, for the birds, listening for the animals and insects, as well as looking around."



Suhsen, his wife and grandkids.

# INSIDE THE REFUGE

## Drought Permitted Wild Rice Growth, Refuge Cleanup

by Steve Karel, Project Leader

Hello, Friends,  
For those who ventured out on the

refuge this past summer, you may have noticed that the wetlands look much different this year. Most of the wetlands are experiencing low water conditions with many being completely dry. The first thought that comes to mind



Steve Karel,  
Project Leader

for many is that these conditions are detrimental to wildlife and habitat. No need to worry. Periodic droughts provide many positive outcomes for wetlands and allow us opportunities to use different tools from our management toolbox.

This summer, the shallow water levels provided the perfect conditions for phenomenal wild rice production across the refuge. Wild rice (Ojibwe: manoomin) exploded in most of our wetlands and densely populated many sections of the St. Francis River.



Cutting sandbar willows in sandhill crane resting areas. USFWS photo

The wild rice will be a prime food source for waterfowl in the upcoming months. Waterfowl may be challenged to access some areas with wild rice this fall due to low water conditions, but with spring snowmelt, the wetlands should provide an excellent food source for waterfowl as they prepare for nesting.

In addition, high seed production years with low water levels such as this will also improve the seed-to-soil contact, enabling increased rice production in future years. Seed can remain viable for many years, and this was obvious this summer as areas that had previously been dense cattail stands rebounded with an abundance of wild rice.

The refuge staff also took advantage of the low water levels by addressing deficiencies in our wetland impoundment infrastructure. Many of our water control structures no longer function properly due to rusted and broken gates. Team Maintenance was able to repair three of our water

structures with more repairs on the docket this fall.

They also used an excavator to clean out many of the clogged cattail and sediment-filled water conveyance ditches. These disturbed areas will be re-seeded to native plants. With the St. Francis reservoir completely dry, we also took advantage of the opportunity to mechanically cut sandbar willow (*Salix interior*) that had taken over much of the prime resting/feeding areas that the sandhill cranes typically use. Although this shrub is native, we want to keep it from overtaking our mudflats and open areas. This area is now free of willow, and the cranes were quick to return.

As St. Francis Pool became dry, another positive outcome was that the carp population was significantly reduced. Their bottom-dwelling spawning and feeding habits affect wetlands by reducing water quality. Poor water quality in turn degrades aquatic vegetation and reduces native fish species. The carp also provide an excellent food source for many fish-eating birds and mammals, which took advantage of the easy pickings.

Wetlands need periodic dry/wet cycles to continue to function properly. During drought times, we observe many wetland plants that would not be able to emerge with higher water levels. Wetland wildlife always find ways to adapt to the changing conditions. Take advantage of this opportunity to see plants and wildlife that you may not typically see in this dynamic environment!

Stay Wild, My Friends!



Dressed for birding, Senator Tina Smith (third from right) came for a refuge tour on June 4 and was hosted by Friends and USFWS leaders.