

PRAIRIE'S EDGE

A NEWSLETTER FROM FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

SUMMER 2020



Kathy May, refuge Volunteer of the Year, inspects the spring blossoms of a chokecherry along the Bur Oak Trail.

REFUGE VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR KATHY MAY

The Refuge Is Like Family

Story and Photos by Bruce Ellingson

This is a story about snakes and granddaughters. Golden Plungers and eight-year-old comedians. And about a refuge that filled a huge need for a volunteer whose work might just be irreplaceable. Meet Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge Volunteer of the Year, Kathy May.

Picture granddaughters Lexi and Gabby gleefully tagging nine little bull snakes while grandma happily tends to a refuge biffy, and you'll appreciate what Kathy May will and won't do for the love of her kin and the love of her refuge. Since 2002, Kathy has been a Refuge Roving, Toilet Cleaning, Trail Adopting, Festival Working volunteer. This year Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge recognized her work and her good nature with its Volunteer of the Year award. (Hint: She's the one holding the plunger).

Kathy May, raised on a farm in rural Milaca, was drawn by some mysterious force to Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge years ago. She spent so much time visiting that her significant other suggested she volunteer here, "so that's how it started." Rich, who became her husband, was so certain it was the

Continued on page 7



Volunteer Kathy May

WE FRIENDS...

Advocate, Educate, Sustain & Volunteer

By President Myrna Krueger

We are advocates for the refuge, my friends. And we hope you'll join our efforts.

In this issue, we're sharing examples of the four pillars of Friends work at Sherburne—advocacy,

education, sustainability, and volunteerism. One of the most important, and the focus of this column, is advocacy.

As a Friends group, we advocate Myrna Krueger for the refuge in any number of ways. Because the refuge is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, its resources are set and guided by Congress. So the Friends rely on a Washington,

Continued on page 2



WE ARE ADVOCATING for The Refuge

Continued from page 1

DC-based partner, the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA), to advocate and lobby for efforts that advance wildlife and habitat conservation. Every year, the Friends support the NWRA with a financial contribution.

Our Advocacy Committee, including Steve Chesney, Emy Minzel, and Randall Holt-Woehl, are focused on providing information to and building relationships with our Congressman and both Minnesota Senators and their staffs. Committee members also spend time responding to alerts from NWRA about special issues that need support and could ultimately affect the refuge and refuge system.

Locally, the Friends join six area Chambers of Commerce, where we share the refuge's story. We also reach out to local businesses and civic organizations to gain their support and are sincerely grateful to our 40 Community Supporters who aided the refuge last year. See our Community Supporters list here:

exploresherburne.org/community-supporters

During these not-so-normal times, perhaps you're spending more time at home. Here's how you can help from the comfort of your armchair! Sign up for alerts from the NWRA and send a donation to support their work:

refugeassociation.org

Let your friends know how much you enjoy the refuge and its events. Invite them to join the Friends. It was Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, who said, "When you love something, you want to protect it." Share your love of the refuge and become a champion for the refuge and refuge system!

Stay safe and see you at the refuge!

Leave a Legacy to Your Refuge

These recent anything-but-normal times have reminded many of us to think about getting our affairs in order. Perhaps you would like to leave a legacy with a gift to support the refuge. There are lots of simple ways to do this, including leaving something in your will or estate plan, or even by naming the Initiative Foundation "for the benefit of Friends of Sherburne" as a beneficiary of a life insurance policy, IRA, Charitable Gift Annuity or Transfer on Death (TOD) deed. Really, it's not that difficult and will benefit the refuge for generations to come.

Meanwhile, ask your tax accountant about how a donor-advised fund might be a good fit for your situation now. You can also donate non-cash items like cars, real estate, stock funds, or even your great aunt's pearls! All of these giving ideas are made possible by working with our partner, the Initiative Foundation. To learn more, contact us at friendsofsherburne@gmail.com

FRIENDS OF SHERBURNE NWR 2020 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Myrna Krueger – President

Steven Chesney – Vice President

Carol VanHeel – Treasurer

Susan Julson – Secretary

Mike Brubaker – Director

Marilyn Danielson – Director

Matt Finn – Director

Randall Holt-Woehl – Director

Bill Kolbinger – Director

Emy Minzel – Director

Scott Suhsen – Director

ADVISORS TO THE BOARD

Steve Karel – Refuge Manager

Alaina Larkin – Visitor Services

Donate or Join Friends 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.

Contact the Friends c/o Sherburne NWR, 17076 293rd Avenue NW, Zimmerman, MN 55398, or at FriendsofSherburne@gmail.com

Visitor Services During a Pandemic

Typical workday at Visitor Services: Greet guests at the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters. Answer questions. Check the computer and respond to emails. Be with people and appreciate the seasonal changes of the refuge.

Typical Pandemic workday: Close the door on home office. Greet the chickadees at the bluebird house outside window. Check the computer. Answer questions. Monitor squirrel activity in the backyard. Be with computer and appreciate nature in the backyard.

Don't misunderstand, there's plenty of Visitor Services work to do, but for much of 2020 that work is being done "remotely, from afar, from home," says Alaina Larkin, Visitor Services Manager. She still gets a few visitor calls (her work line is 763-260-3078) and refuge emails (Sherburne@fws.gov), but for now (as of June 1) she "goes to work" by closing the door to her home office, positioning her chair so her computer monitor and the window to her backyard are both convenient and, with binoculars close by to monitor the backyard action, works remotely.



Alaina Larkin,
Visitor Services

From afar, Alaina and her colleagues have been combing the refuge website to update and refine visitor information. She and her team are also doing a design overhaul of refuge signage and brochures. Expect to see new signage at the Bur Oak Welcome Station at the Wildlife Drive, Mahnomen Trail, and the mowed parking lots late this season.

Alaina, like you, is living with the guidelines of a pandemic and following her own advice, which is "Take time to get outside regularly, even if in your own yard or neighborhood," says Alaina. "And notice the little changes. Stop to look closely at new blooms, soak in the intricate details of nature. It gives you time to really slow down and think." Of course, as you'd expect from a refuge ranger, Alaina has suggestions for expanding your nature knowledge as well. "Actively investigate," says Alaina. "I'm much more likely to

remember facts or identification if I've taken the time to figure it out for myself." Phone or tablet apps such as iNaturalist (iNaturalist.org) and eBird (eBird.org) offer instant information.

She advises, "Start small. Go easy on yourself. Adding complex knowledge definitely takes time. This is just the beginning of an adventure."

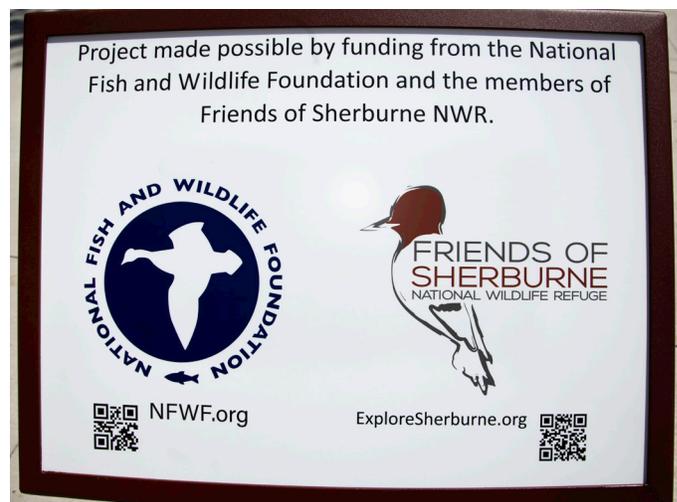
Miss the refuge? Stay in touch virtually, says Alaina. The refuge Friends Facebook page has posts by recent visitors as well as from Visitor Services reporting on wildlife and plants: facebook.com/sherburnerefugefans

Check the refuge website, too, especially the "Just for Kids" page, which includes coloring books, scavenger hunts, and live animal cameras. Raccoons, great blue herons, and hooded mergansers have been appearing nightly: fws.gov/refuge/Sherburne/visit/just_for_kids.html

Check refuge status at the COVID-19 info page: fws.gov/nwrs/threecolumn.aspx?id=6442460666

Let nature keep you positive!

"Whenever I get stuck, I go outside or look out my office window," says Alaina, who is into a refuge ranger's kind of meditation: "Weeding is soothing, offers instant gratification, allows me to institute change on some minute level, AND my yard has never looked as good as it does this year!"



Newly installed at Bur Oak Welcome Station.

IF YOU DO VISIT THE REFUGE

Please leave no trace and pack out any trash including pet waste; keep your dog on a leash for the protection of your pet as well as other visitors; plan your visit outside peak hours; if a parking lot is full, please don't stop; observe social distancing and other CDC-recommended practices; and report refuge violations to the refuge federal wildlife officer at 612-283-8963.

COVID-19 INSPIRES

'Springtime' Creativity In Nature Education

By Sue Hix

Spring migrants were arriving, windows were washed, the yard was raked, but COVID-19 cancellations and postponements were still affecting our lives. Visits by 700 Partner School students and teachers were scheduled to begin soon, but they

to use at refuge and community events. Then would come developing grade-specific scavenger hunt sheets for all 4 seasons and, after that, work on directional signs for refuge trails.

Meanwhile, back at home, this nature ed leader was tired of



Springtime Sue (aka Sue Hix) stars in the nature segment of a Zimmerman Elementary video series, now available on YouTube.

wouldn't happen in 2020. So what was a nature education leader to do?

Jenny Hengel, Friends contracted naturalist, was as disappointed as all of the nature education volunteers to miss out on student visits, but, working with Visitor Services Manager Alaina Larkin, she got busy creating nature education kits with activities and materials



about a variety of refuge-specific wildlife and habitat topics—perfect for rovers to use on the Wildlife Drive or for volunteers

cleaning house. With no student visits to look forward to this spring, I was pleased to hear from Diana Doherty, Partner School teacher and Friends member, who shared a YouTube link to one of the daily announcement videos she had been creating for Zimmerman Elementary. For the past 2 years she had produced the daily announcement videos with a phenology segment in each one; now, however, with “distance learning” starting at her school, she had to make them appropriate for public viewing on YouTube. In addition to the “Moment in Nature,” other regular content included the day's birthdays, “This Day in History,” weather with Chip Sunshine, a

lesson with Vocab-U-Larry, and the Pledge of Allegiance. The videos were informational, positive, full of energy—and fun! See an episode here: youtu.be/mSC3DFR18W0

With Diana's creativity as inspiration, *Springtime Sue* was born. Her (my!) first episode, in mid-April on the Mahnomen Trail with snowflakes flying, explored a hole at the base of an oak tree. A bit later in the month she (!!) highlighted a Pasque flower blooming near the Learning Center.

Appearing between Chip Sunshine & Vocab-U-Larry, she had a tough gig...

...even worse on Tuesdays when Mrs. Miller hosted Totally Tubular Trivia Tuesday. So Springtime Sue stepped up her reporting efforts and featured a close-up look at early spring flowers, including Canada ginger and bloodroot. Then she focused on a robin nest and its 4 eggs, oak flowers, and “leaves of 3,” ending with poison ivy.

With the school year winding down and the new summer scavenger hunt sheets ready to distribute, Springtime Sue took her K-2 Scavenger Hunt sheet to the refuge to show the Zimmerman Elementary students how they can download and use the scavenger hunt this summer, whether at the refuge or in the backyard. See Scavenger Hunts and other activities on the refuge Just for Kids page: fws.gov/refuge/Sherburne/visit/just_for_kids.html

If all goes well, Springtime Sue will finish the school year with an episode featuring recent spring highlights, including petting a fawn and getting her first haircut in more than THREE months!

FIND HER ON YOUTUBE!
For more of Springtime Sue, go to: tinyurl.com/y7h2j6ol

INSIDE THE REFUGE

By Steve Karel, Project Leader

Hello Friends,

It has been a bumpy road over the last few months as we entered uncharted territory in response to the coronavirus pandemic. As most of you may already know, Service employees were asked to carry out our duties in a telework environment. This presents many challenges, especially for staff whose normal duties are out in the field. With some creativity, though, we have been able to keep “boots on the ground” folks—such as maintenance, fire, and biology staff—busy with tasks that are typically not in their wheelhouse. Although we didn’t get to put prescribed fire on the landscape this spring, we were able to get a jump-start on updating most of our refuge



Steve Karel,
Project Leader

signage and brochures. We will have a new look once we can get our new recreation and regulations signs out on the refuge.

Although outdoor-accessible restrooms are now open, our headquarters office and the Oak Savanna Learning Center remain closed because staff have not been available to maintain these at a level required to minimize spread of COVID-19. The irony is that, as these fa-



East side of the Wildlife Drive was a popular place many pandemic mornings.

cilities are closed, spring refuge visitation has been higher than we have ever experienced. In March, our parking lots were overflowing, so we opened the Wildlife Drive early to help disperse

visitors. The downside was that the frost had not yet gone out, and the high volume of traffic caused large wet areas and potholes in the road. The refuge also experienced an extremely high number of violations. Officer Rod Hansen handed out numerous citations and written warnings for trespass violations to visitors who were turkey hunting, camping, dumping illegally, or starting wildfires. We are fortunate to have a high caliber officer to help keep things in order.

The question on everyone’s mind now is, “When will normal operations resume?” We are just beginning to implement Phase 1 and will be closely following the State of Minnesota and CDC guidelines as well as the President’s Opening up America Again guidance to bring back staff and open facilities. Our Regional Director has provided us steps for returning field employees to normal operations. Some of us who typically have a large administrative workload will continue to telework, and although some staff may be able to report more regularly to the office, the office will remain closed to the public. There is a newly installed doorbell by the front door and, if you ring it, staff may be available during business hours to answer urgent in-person questions right outside HQ.



Volunteer Roving Interpreters were NOT back on duty at the Wildlife Drive as of June 1.

The Oak Savanna Learning Center and Friends nature stores will most likely remain closed until Phase 2 can be implemented. Since the situation is constantly evolving, it is hard to say when the next phase will be initiated or whether we may need to step back if spread of the virus increases. We are hopeful that we will soon be able to bring back volunteers to assist with tasks that have minimal visitor contact and where social distancing can be implemented. The most important thing now is the safety of the staff and refuge volunteers: We will take every precaution necessary to keep everyone healthy and safe. Please be patient with the process, stay healthy, and continue to get outside and enjoy the refuge.

Stay Wild, My Friends!

VOLUNTEERS ESSENTIAL TO REFUGE MISSION

According to Visitor Services Manager Alaina Larkin, volunteers are essential to advancing the mission of the refuge. In 2019, refuge volunteers:

- Welcomed 1570 elementary-aged students for nature ed. field trips.
- Interacted with more than 2300 visitors at Headquarters and more than 1800 visitors on the Drive.
- Collected and cleaned 25.5 pounds of seed.
- Mowed 11 miles of trails, 24 parking lots, and miles of service roads.
- Cleaned litter from 35 miles of county roads and visitor parking areas.
- Greeted more than 1200 visitors at Wildlife Festival.
- Stocked thousands of brochures.
- Monitored sandhill cranes during early morning surveys, with a record peak of 14,578 cranes estimated in early November.
- Led 10 public tours/hikes focusing on birds, wildflowers, and photography.
- Planted 250 bur oak saplings as part of a larger oak savanna habitat restoration project.

Arrival Spot Taking Shape! BUR OAK WELCOME STATION

The Bur Oak Welcome Station on the Wildlife Drive is a \$26,000+ project that has been more than 18 months in the making. Funded by the Friends of Sherburne and a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant, the Welcome Station gives refuge visitors a place to get comfortable and oriented when arriving at the refuge—even when Refuge Headquarters is closed, as it usually is on evenings and weekends but also has been since COVID-19 restrictions began.



Refuge staff Alaina Larkin and Tyler Paulson install bike racks, picnic tables, benches, new kiosk signage, and Bur Oak Welcome Station signs. Stop to see it!

BLIND NOT OPERATIONAL...YET!

Friends Wildlife Viewing Blind Located on Temporary Site



Another Friends project to be completed this summer is this viewing blind, built and transported to the site last winter, though not fully operational due to COVID-19 delays.

Once conditions permit, the blind will be placed on a permanent crushed-granite pad and ADA-accessible trail connectors will be constructed from the hunter parking lot thru trails to the site.



Current blind placement (left) and viewing perspective (above).

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR

Continued from page 1

place for her that he tried to buy her a garage sale coffee cup that had once been given out as a 50-hour refuge volunteer thank you gift. No need, Kathy had her own by her first volunteer banquet in 2003. Since 2002 she has completed 925 volunteer hours and earned a Golden Plunger as well.

Kathy began her formal relationship with the refuge as an Interpretive Rover. Quickly, the refuge became “a big part of my life,” says Kathy. “It’s filled an empty spot that I had. They call it ‘the refuge’ for a reason. You can get out here with the wildlife and be on your own and you don’t see anybody for an hour and then you might see people all the time. I spend a lot of time out here.” Her husband Rich, who passed away in 2005, understood her need.

To plunge ahead with the story, it’s her first year—the formative time for Rovers—”and a car pulls up beside me. This young kid, about eight, says, ‘Hey lady. Do you know why you never see dead crows on the road?’

“I say, ‘No. Why?’ He says, ‘because there’s always one up in the tree going car, car, car.’

“That was when I thought, you know, these kids are fun. I’m going to like this.”

But about that plunger. As noted, Kathy began volunteering as an Interpretive Rover, which at that time put her in contact with Nancy Haugen, then Visitor Services Manager and volunteer coordinator, a woman who loved her volunteers...though not everyone got a hug, like Kathy.

“One of my happiest days as Visitor Services Manager at Sherburne,” says Nancy,

“was the day that Kathy May came into my office and offered to do a weekly cleanup of the new outdoor restrooms! I had been stewing over the need for a weekly cleaning of the outdoor toilets for quite some time; wondering how it could be achieved. I didn’t want to recruit a volunteer to clean toilets. And here was Kathy offering to do it! Without any hesitation I said, ‘YES!!, I’d love your help!’ And I gave her a huge hug!”

Nancy didn’t come up with Kathy’s prized Golden Plunger Award, that was Patty Crockford, another refuge volunteer who routinely complimented Kathy on the condition of the bathrooms. Finally, for an annual Volunteer Banquet, Patty created a golden plunger—spray-painted gold and be-ribboned—to give Kathy for her selfless biffy service.

Kathy was unable to be at that banquet, but cherishes the plunger and made it known that any portrait for this article would include the award!

Now, about those snakes. Kathy and granddaughters Lexi and Gabby set out on roving duty. Kathy begins cleaning the restrooms at the Blue Hill Trail while the girls explore and find a bull snake, which attracts a pair of herpetologists who happen to be tagging bull snakes in this very area. Lexi and Gabby help the experts tag the snake, all the while hollering for grandma to join them and hold the reptile.

“No,” grandma says, “I’m good with cleaning the bathrooms. I don’t do snakes.”

The bathrooms clean, the snake tagged, Kathy loads up the car to begin roving the Wildlife Drive



Kathy May routinely assists Mel Klein and his horse-drawn wagons at the refuge fall Wildlife Festival.

when nine baby snakes pop out of their hole. Lexi and Gabby pop out of the car and head back to measure and tag the babies. This is the refuge day they will talk about forever.

Lexi, who first roved when she was 4, is now 21. Lexi and Gabby both earned their 50-hour volunteer pins helping grandma. Grandkids Joe, Cassidy, and Kasey have roved with grandma as well. Every trip has been an adventure for them.

Even with her grandkids grown, Kathy comes back, drawn by the animals who need their refuge, “When the animals are gone, we will be too,” she says.

And drawn—perhaps—by her ancestors.

Not many years after she began roving, Kathy bumped into a cousin on the Drive and learned that her grandfather had gone to a country school here and, eventually, had farmed either side of Blue Hill. From the top of the Hill, her grandfather could see the railroad station in Princeton, she learned.

Probably, too, he could have traced the route Kathy has taken, weekly, from her home north of here to commune with nature and to keep the ancestral family grounds neat and tidy for visitors.



17076 293rd Avenue NW
Zimmerman, MN 55398

FIND US ON:    
ExploreSherburne.org

UPCOMING EVENTS

As of this writing in early June, stores are beginning to open and seating is available at some restaurants. At the refuge, the outdoor-accessible restrooms are open again, but other facilities remain closed, and the June Wildflower Tour has gone virtual. It is too early to know whether events planned for the rest of the year—most notably, the Wildlife Festival—will be able to be held as planned. Consider the following events schedule to be **tentative**. For event updates, please consult the following resources:

- Refuge website: fws.gov/refuge/Sherburne/
- Friends website: exploresherburne.org
- Friends Facebook page: facebook.com/sherburnerefugefans/
- Friends Prairie Insider e-newsletter: To subscribe, enter email address as requested at bottom of home page at ExploreSherburne.org or email request to FriendsofSherburne@gmail.com

Bird Tours

- Saturday, August 22, 8 – 10 am, Mahnomen Trail
- Saturday, August 29, 8 – 10 am, Blue Hill Trail

Wildflower Tour

- Saturday, September 12, 10 am – 12 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center

Wildlife Festival

- Saturday, September 26, 10 am – 3 pm, Oak Savanna Learning Center

Sandhill Crane Tours

- October 17, 22, 24, 28, 6:30 – 9 am
- Reservations **required** & open on September 9



Pasqueflower by Bruce Ellingson