



Blazing Star

Newsletter for the Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District

Welcome to the Blazing Star, the newsletter for Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District. Stay up to date on our current projects and events while learning about conservation and management efforts, endangered species, and habitat restoration.

Let's come together to protect our precious local flora and fauna.

Update from the Board: President's Report

Hello Friends and Fellow Conservationists!

There is much going on in our world at this time on many and all fronts. For starters, we have the arrival of spring, a time of renewal, rejuvenation, and hope as we head into the warm months. The trees are budding, flowers are blooming, and the prairies are greening. It is a time of optimism and excitement, a time of daily growth and change. These are all things we see in our daily lives as well, especially with the world economy and political climate. As a matter of reflection, I recently reread Aldo Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac." Leopold was not an angry man; He was a thinking man in a time when the world was hungry for more and more of anything and everything. Today, we are a society that is still hungry, perhaps much hungrier for more and more. Where does this more and more come from? It takes four oz. of oil

to make the plastic resin to create a single disposable plastic water bottle. We are consumers, masters of consumption. I wonder what Leopold would think of today's world. I can say that no matter where you stand politically or ideologically, we must remember to be harmonious with the land. In an age when electricity is powering massive AI computer systems, cars, phones, Wi-Fi routers, and more, society demands the materials not only to create the electricity but also the copper ore, plastics, and metals that all come from the land to make it happen. It is an amazing time we live in, but at what cost? With that, I leave you with a Leopold quote: "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering." A balance of things, if you will. I wish you all a wonderful spring.

Brian Headlee
President, FSCWMD

Manager's Notes:

By Bridget Olson

Farewell

In a past article I shared that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the only federal agency whose primary responsibility is to manage fish and wildlife resources in the public trust for people today as well as future generations. I believe it is that noble mission and purpose that inspires such dedication and passion from staff, volunteers, and conservation partners alike.

The opportunity to enact conservation on the landscape by protecting and directly managing habitats as we do in the National Wildlife Refuge System has been the privilege of a lifetime for me. After 34 years with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and 31 with the National Wildlife Refuge System, I have decided to call it a career and will be retiring towards the end of May.

I am grateful for my amazing career spanning four states, seven refuges, and seven stations, cheered on by my supportive husband Peter and sons Nathan and Jacob. It has been my honor to be the Project Leader here at St. Croix Wetland Management District & Whittlesey Creek National

Wildlife Refuge for the last eight years, leading and working alongside staff, colleagues, partners, volunteers, and Friends who are so amazingly talented and passionate! I have met and worked with so many wonderful people throughout my journey, co-workers, partners, and volunteers alike, who continue to inspire me with their dedication, deep commitment, and passion for our conservation work. I am also thankful for the many mentors who encouraged me along the way and the women in conservation who paved the path ahead of me. I count myself among the lucky few whose avocation also happened to be their vocation. I hope you continue to be vocal in supporting public lands and how essential the National Wildlife Refuge System is to wildlife and people. May you continue to find joy in the great outdoors and public lands as a place to feed your soul in the quiet moments when we hear the wind whistling through duck wings, the trill of bird song on a summer morning, or walk-through public lands set aside for wildlife and people alike to thrive.

Helping the Refuge System in this Time of Change

By Tim Nixon and Greg Scheder

As we are all aware, there are a lot of changes happening in Washington, DC. In light of that, we are asking members and volunteers to reach out to their representatives in support of the refuge system. A sample letter is enclosed as well as some alternate language. Pick and choose, or add what you wish. Representative contact information is below.

Letter to Congress: Support Full Funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System

Subject: Urgent: Protect Our National Wildlife Refuges from Devastating Budget Cuts

Dear [Representative/Senator] [Last Name],

I am writing to express deep concern over the significant budget cuts currently affecting our National Wildlife Refuge System—the world’s largest network of public lands dedicated to the conservation of wildlife. As your constituent, I urge you to stand up for the future of these vital lands by advocating for full or increased funding for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Recent reports indicate that over 470 biologists, natural resource professionals, and other critical workers have been laid off since last month alone, adding to an ongoing staffing crisis that has already reduced the FWS workforce by a quarter since 2011. These cuts threaten the very foundation of wildlife conservation in our country, and the consequences will be felt not just by the natural world, but by the millions of Americans who rely on these spaces for education, recreation, and connection to nature.

Our National Wildlife Refuge System encompasses over 560 unique refuges, from salt marshes and mud flats to lakeshores and islands, that receive more than 50 million visitors annually. Many of these refuges operate on a modest budget and rely heavily on local volunteers. Without sufficient full-time staff, even volunteer programs, which are crucial to keeping refuges open and operational, are now in jeopardy.

Locally, we are fortunate to have the St. Croix Wetland Management District. While the office is located in New Richmond, WI, the District is comprised of 46 Waterfowl Production Areas managing over 8,800 acres of our public lands, mainly in Polk and St. Croix Counties. 8,000-10,000 visitors a year frequent these units, many of them hunters. This provides valuable access to public lands not only for hunting but also for hiking, photography, and educational opportunities.

The District also hosts an annual Veteran’s Hunt at a handicapped accessible waterfowl blind on the Erickson Waterfowl Production Area by New Richmond, allowing us to thank Veterans for their service. Middle school students from New Richmond and Somerset, WI benefit annually from collaboration with District staff to learn about the value of prairies, wetlands, and oak savannas, as well as participate in native seed collection activities. Numerous community education programs also take advantage of these lands.

Beloved refuges like Crystal River in Florida, where families gather to observe gentle manatees, and Kilauea Point in Hawaii, a spectacular cliff-side sanctuary that draws half a million visitors a year, are already feeling the impact. These places provide irreplaceable experiences and support local economies through tourism and recreation. The cuts could severely limit visitor access, educational programming, and daily maintenance, undermining decades of conservation progress.

Helping the Refuge System in this Time of Change

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The National Wildlife Refuge System also plays an essential role in protecting migratory bird populations. For example, Tule Lake Refuge along the Pacific Flyway serves as a key rest stop for 80% of waterfowl traversing that route. With fewer staff, services like canoe rentals and habitat maintenance are at risk of being suspended. Perhaps most symbolic is Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, the very first refuge established by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903. Over a century later, it remains a haven for species like brown pelicans and green sea turtles. But even this historic site is not immune to the current wave of budget cuts.

Now more than ever, we must reaffirm our commitment to conservation and public lands. I respectfully urge you to oppose further funding cuts to the National Wildlife Refuge System and instead work to increase support for staff, maintenance, and programming that benefit all Americans.

Please join me and others in protecting the future of our nation's wildlife refuges.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address]
[City, State, ZIP Code]
[Email Address]
[Phone Number]

ADDITIONAL/ALTERNATE LANGUAGE:

The St. Croix Wetland Management District has some unique features as well. For instance, the Seed Nursery, which is used to restore wetlands in this district, is one of the few in the nation managed by the Refuge System to restore acquired lands. One person manages the Nursery, but a host of volunteers assist throughout the summer to harvest seed for future use. This seed, if purchased, would cost the Refuge System thousands of dollars each year, not to mention the quality of seed acquired during a season compared to seed that would be purchased with no guarantee of quality or viability. These seed stocks also provide a valuable resource for other public land rehabilitations in partnership with local, state, and federal agencies.

One area of the Refuge, Oak Ridge Reserve, is designated a Swan Refuge and hosts hundreds of breeding swans that only a few years ago were significantly rarer. These are notable but are only a part of the many reasons to preserve and support the Refuge System for the public and the communities and individuals that use and need them.

While protecting these public lands is important, the need for adequate staffing is also urgent. The National Refuge System oversees 96 million terrestrial and 760 million marine acres. Currently, there are only 2,350 full-time employees (FTEs) to support 570 National Wildlife Refuges and 38 Wetland Management Districts. Already down roughly 30 percent from approximately 3,200 FTEs in 2011, the recent staff reductions compound the challenges of effectively managing these vital resources. We would like to ask for your support not only to stem further staff reductions but also to support additional funding when the new budget is reviewed for the upcoming years. We are asking for your support for our district and the general staffing of the Refuge System. We need your help maintaining these resources for ongoing school programs, 4H and Scout projects, hunting and fishing opportunities, managing seed collection and invasive species, chronic littering, and subsequent clean-ups.

Helping the Refuge System in this Time of Change

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President Trump

The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500
Or: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/>

Senator Tammy Baldwin

Senator Baldwin
141 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
Or: <https://www.baldwin.senate.gov/>

Senator Ron Johnson

328 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
Or: <https://www.ronjohnson.senate.gov/>

Representative Tom Tiffany

451 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, District of Columbia 20515
Or: <https://tiffany.house.gov/>

Representative Derrick VanOrden

1513 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, District of Columbia 20515
Or: <https://vanorden.house.gov/>

Calendar of Upcoming Events

APRIL

April 26 Sat 9:00 am–12:00 pm Annual WPA Clean Up Day (Headquarters Office)

MAY

May 1–May 20 -----> Annual Waterfowl Surveys <-----

May 14 Wed 6:00 pm–7:30 pm Friends of the St. Croix WMD Meeting (Headquarters Office)

May 17 Sat 8:00 am–12:00 pm Bird Banding with Carpenter Nature Center (Oak Ridge Reserve across the road from the Seed Farm, 1616 County Rd H)

JUNE

June Tues 3, 10, 17, 24 6:00–8:00 pm Seed collection (Star Prairie Seed Nursery or designated parcel)

June 11 Wed 6:00–7:30 pm Friends of the St. Croix WMD Meeting (Headquarters Office)

JULY

July Tues 1, 8, 15, 22, 29 6:00–8:00 pm Seed collection (Star Prairie Seed Nursery or designated parcel)

July 9 Wed 6:00–7:30 pm Friends of the St. Croix WMD Meeting (Headquarters Office)

July 19 Sat 5:30–7:30 pm Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation Tour/Course

Grassland Bird Survey Note:

In **2024**, about 20 volunteers surveyed 24 Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) during the months of June, July, and August. 3,028 individual birds of 104 species were heard and/or seen, including the primary target species Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink, and Henslow's Sparrow.

The surveys will continue this year (June through August). If you are interested in helping out with this year's counts, please contact Jean Gfall (jegfall252@gmail.com). You do not need to be an experienced birder! Training will be provided if needed. Between that, the Merlin app, and your willingness to donate three mornings over the summer, you will be ready to go and welcomed to the team!



Sunset in a Meadow—Photo Credits:Felix Mittermeier, Pixabay

Owl Prowl and Night Sky Report

By Tom Kretovichs

On the evening of February 2nd, the Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District held an owl prowling and night sky viewing event at the Prairie Flats South Waterfowl Production Area in Star Prairie Township. Dan Peterson, Park Ranger for the National Park Service, gave an outstanding and informative presentation on the owls of Wisconsin, with a special emphasis on the owls we might possibly see on the property. Dan has a wealth of knowledge of the many owl species and a remarkable ability to call owls. After the presentation and questions from the group of about 30 listeners, we followed Dan to the prairie to listen. Dan continued to entertain the group with his calls and his commentary. The owls, however, were not impressed and refused to respond. The weather did not cooperate either, so we were not able to view the night sky.

Dan and fellow NPS Park Ranger Mike Raymonds returned to Prairie Flats South for another try to view the night sky on February 23rd. Mike set up a telescope and gave a short presentation about the constellations and the rare lineup of planets that would be visible that evening. The clouds opened up briefly so the group could view Venus, Jupiter, and two of its moons.

Unfortunately, the clouds quickly returned, and we lost our opportunity to view them.

Even though the owls and the night sky refused to cooperate, the efforts of both Dan and Mike of the National Park Service were greatly appreciated. Everyone in attendance seemed to enjoy the evening on the prairie.

Spotlight: Fire Season 2025

Signs of Spring

By Tracy Ronnander

With the official beginning of spring now in our rearview mirror, many of us start looking forward to the signs we use to cue us that winter is over and spring is here. Fire management specialists look at ground moisture and frost conditions, loss of snowpack, greening up of dry dead vegetation, and weather patterns to consider for both wildland fire suppression and prescribed fire operations. These cues tell us how and what to expect when planning for wildland fire operations.

This is just one of the many ways that we get ready for our spring fire season. The activities are planned in accordance with the weather conditions, including fire equipment readiness, annual firefighter physical training and testing, communication plans, and site preparations. These are just a few of the activities going on currently in the district. Preseason activities allow us to be ready to take the call for both wildland fire suppression and prescribed fire activities when weather presents the task.

Over the past year, the SCWMD was able to accomplish over 800 acres of mechanical fuel work across numerous WPAs in the district. The projects included hazardous fuels reduction that utilized heavy brush grinding equipment to reduce the fuel load, minimizing the risk of wildfire in the wildland-urban interface (WUI). The projects were targeted at WPAs with very high fire danger ratings. Brush grinding also allows for the construction of firebreaks along the perimeters of the properties to be utilized both in wildland fire impression for access and as control

lines when conducting prescribed fire operations for property management activities. Prescribed fire will be conducted on many of these areas in the future to reduce the layer of woody chipped material from the sites. Burning allows the areas to become more receptive to native seed sources found in the sites and to overseeding actions that create a diverse plant understory ecosystem in which invasive woody species have outcompeted before the mechanical treatments.



Signs of Spring—Photo Credits: Tracy Ronnander

Spotlight: Fire Season 2025

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Prescribed fire locations are selected with many variables in mind for land management. Still, to safely implement the project, weather conditions must be within the burn plan's written prescriptions regarding wind speeds and direction, temperatures, drought conditions, smoke dispersal, and relative humidities, to name a few. WPAs tentatively planned for RX fire this spring include Prairie Flats South, St. Croix Prairie, Star Prairie, Twelve Ponds, Deer Park, Kostka, Bass Lake, Ten Mile, Betterly, Stanton Prairie, and Spring Meadows.

As the weather continues to warm, I am hopeful that one of my cues of spring is the sight

and smell of smoke from a prescribed fire on one of the WPAs throughout the district. The prescribed fire will rejuvenate tall grass prairie and oak savanna ecosystems, producing many more cues of spring with fresh green flora and fauna sprouting on the beautiful landscapes of western Wisconsin. Be sure to be on the lookout for your signs of spring on a WPA near you!



Signs of Spring—Photo Credit: Tracy Ronnander

Spotlight: Conservation Corner

The Educational Value of Prairies, Wetlands, and Oak Savannahs

By Mike Reiter

The Friends of the St Croix Wetland Management District (FSCWMD), since its inception, has emphasized the importance of education and educational activities that are available within the District. As stated in their Mission Statement, "FSCWMD is organized for the purpose of supporting, assisting, and promoting the St. Croix Wetlands Management District with interpretive, scientific, historical, recreational, and educational services throughout the eight-county District."

Since that time, the FSCWMD has made it a priority to provide quality educational venues in their programs, presentations, and activities. Educational efforts to include all age groups will continue to be a major component as we move forward in 2025!

Looking over the program plans for the coming year highlights the commitment of the group to provide something "educational" for everyone at all levels. From our walks and talks to the activities at the Seed Farm, learning about the wonders of the outdoors and how they can expand our personal outlook and both physical and mental health is a positive outcome.

Educational programs in the past have promoted ways to become involved in making a positive impact on the environment. Conservation Day on a WPA each year has focused on an educational aspect and has provided a positive impact. Invasive species awareness and methods of eradication or the value of using the local genome when collecting and distributing seed for restoring prairies and wetlands are just two of the many possibilities. "Hands-on learning" and

visual assessment of the positives they provide are a valuable part of the larger picture!

Annual walks and talks, bird banding demonstrations, habitat enhancement opportunities, and numerous other programs that make up our learning agenda will continue to offer these positive outcomes.

Partnerships with other groups and organizations have incorporated many different viewpoints into a much clearer way forward. Combining all the resources offers more diversity in what we can offer, and we are always open to exploring new avenues.

The FSCWMD has assembled an array of "hands-on" educational tools available for general use. Tools for invasive species control, such as buckthorn mitigation, are available to groups who may wish to use them. Over the years, an extensive "Birds on a Stick" collection has been assembled for educational displays. These mounted species are mounted with one wing extended to aid in identifying species while in flight. Literature explaining the identification and life aspects of each animal is also available. A collection of pelts, skulls, and mounts can be used in teaching situations and are available for checkout and use. We are looking for folks who may be interested in setting up venues in local places such as libraries, schools, or organizational settings that might benefit from these displays. Members are also available to provide talks on various aspects of these displays. Please contact any FSCWMD board member for more information.

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The Educational Value of Prairies, Wetlands, and Oak Savannahs

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Another valuable aspect of the learning process is the intern program. Each year, interns are retained by the St. Croix Wetland Management District to assist with some of their projects and services on area Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs). A stipend is provided to the participants, but the most valuable part of the program is the on-the-job education participants receive. This education acquired during their tenure makes a big difference when the participant enters the job market and can document this work-related job experience. It is a win/win for everyone involved!

The FSCWMD is dedicated to the learning process and will continue to strive to fill all aspects in future programs. Become part of the adventure and have fun doing it!



Prairies, Wetlands, & Oak Savannahs: Photo Credit— Claude Bovi

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Newsletter for the Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District

How to get involved

1. Volunteer

We're always looking for volunteers to help with our conservation projects and events. Contact us by sending an email to StCroix@fws.gov or visiting our website to learn more (link below).

2. Upcoming Events

The Friends Group holds monthly meetings at the headquarters office on the first Wednesday of every month, 6 pm. See our calendar for more events!

Thank you to our many partners!

For more information on our partners, please visit fscwmd.org.

3. Donate

Your donations help support our conservation efforts and make a difference. All donations to the Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District are 100% Tax-Deductible. Donate here through [PayPal](#).

4. Follow Us

Please stay up to date on our latest projects and events by following us on social media. Find us on [Facebook](#), join our email list, and check out our website (link below).

[FriendsOfTheStCroixWetlandManagementDistrict](#)



Education On the Wing Ducks on a Stick—And YOU!

By Jean Gfall and Greg Scheder

The great thing about a volunteer organization like Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District is, like Amazon, there is something for everyone. Whether it's an evening of seed collection with Alex and Jean, annual waterfowl pair counts, grassland bird surveys, or getting your hands dirty during the annual spring clean-up event, the District offers opportunities for everyone.

Many who visit the office admire the incredible Ducks on a Stick display in the conference room, aka—"the garage," and not just ducks but upland game, woodpeckers, songbirds, and even some skulls. Building a comprehensive display of our prairie and wetland friends has been an ongoing priority of the Friends. The goal: build a resource that can be shared for educational opportunities in the eight-county district. So, where are we at? Step 1—Build the collection. Done.

Step 2—Build awareness and get the display out to the public. Work in progress, and where we need your help. Work in progress.

Before COVID, the collection was shared with libraries and schools in the area. But Buck Malick, the original facilitator, can no longer support the mission. Greg and Jean are looking for a couple of champions to revitalize the program. We are looking for a team of two or three; more would be even better to address this challenge.

The vision we have is:

- Create an inventory of what we offer.
- Create documentation about each species—display cards.
- Create a transportation plan.
- Contact local schools and libraries to set up a presentation schedule.
- Transport collection to display location and pick up at the conclusion.
- Care for and maintain the collection.
- Present display at local events.

If you have a passion for youth environmental training, this is the perfect opportunity for you. We anticipate sharing the display one or two times per month and maybe five to six events per year (Farm City Days, River Falls Earth Day expo). Let us know your interest, and we'll get you started. Just let Greg (Gregory.Scheder@fws.gov) or Jean (Jean_Gfall@fws.gov) know.



Ducks on at Stick display: Photo Credits—Greg Scheder

Volunteer Spotlight: Warren Irle

Oak Ridge Waterfowl Production Area—My Friend

By Warren Irle

On this 50th anniversary of the federal government's acquisition of Oak Ridge, reflections on the past.

In 1942, My dad, Wayne, bought 120 acres of wild farmland on the Oak Ridge Section. I was destined to spend my now 76 years on that land. In 1944, Dad brought his bride, Ruth, to the farm where, later in life, she told me she thought it was the wilderness.

Our farm on Oak Ridge was typical at that time. My sister Nancy and I, to this day, remember our outhouse and carrying water from the pump to the house. Frost on our bedroom window would be an inch thick all winter. But I also remember the wildlife. Red fox would walk up the cow path with their kits; songbirds filled the pastures; grouse drummed in the woods, and the ducks... man, the ducks!

The cow yard faced south, and the animals came through a four-foot door. That door gave me a birds-eye view of all the moving waterfowl between carrying milk to the cold water cans. All fall, they came; I can still hear the wings! I never shot a duck on Oak Ridge. Conservation-minded neighbors thought it best to give the birds a refuge. That only made the neighboring lands better. It wasn't even uncommon to spook a jackrabbit.



In June, we would cut our hay. The fields had lots of pheasant and duck nests on them. It would break my dad's heart when we would destroy a nest. He devised what he dubbed a "flushing bar." It attached to the sickle mower and extended four feet in front. It would flush the hen off the nest before being hit. Usually, the nest was saved, only to fall prey to the crows. But the hen had a chance to nest again. I remember trying to cover those exposed nests after evening milking and, with a little luck, have a whippoorwill sing me to sleep from the Oak Ridge hills.

In my lifetime, I have walked across a dry Oak Ridge to seeing fishermen pull out northern and pan fish. I feel blessed for the memories and having a small haven for wild things in my backyard.

In 2015, with my new puppy Pearl in my arms, I stood in the shadows and watched as my childhood home went up in flames. The land had been sold to the USFWS and all the buildings were removed from the old farm of my youth. I felt OK with that, knowing the land would be kept in beautiful grasslands. In the last ten years, I've watched many people enjoy the land where I caught frogs as a boy. I'm a proud member of The Friends of the St. Croix Wetlands, and we have introduced many people to Oak Ridge through our events. It makes me feel good to see them enjoy the land I grew up on. A big oak tree still stands in what was our front yard. I have four bird dogs buried underneath it. Where our house stood now grows flowers. The land remembers.



Oak Ridge WPA: Photo Credits—Warren Irle