

Prairie Wind

VOLUME 15 - NUMBER 1

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SPRING 2009

Friends Unite!

By Stan Kuhn, Treasurer, Friends of the PLC

Wow! The enthusiasm of over 300 Friends from 240 national wildlife refuges and four federal hatcheries at the 5th National Friends Conference in Washington, D.C., put a spotlight on the successes and the needs of these national treasures.

The event, February 21-23, was co-hosted by the FWS and the NWRA. Tom Prall and I, representing the Neal Smith Refuge Friends, were privileged to participate in this event. Not only did we convey the support of volunteer Friends to our elected leaders, we had the opportunity to learn ideas and strategies to enhance our efforts on behalf of federal refuges and hatcheries.

In a variety of sessions, Friends learned how to better work with federal professionals to improve refuges. A session on Conservation Leadership enabled us to benchmark our Friends organization against “best practices” benchmarks. Coordinating the Friends strategic planning with the long-range refuge conservation planning process was the focus of another valuable discussion.

Effective use of the internet, including Facebook, ignited a high level of interest in a session on “*Organizing in the Age of Connectivity*.” Friends across the USA shared fund raising ideas at yet another group event. At an evening banquet, Friends

from Mississippi Pool 9 were recognized for outstanding achievements at their refuge.

But perhaps the most important outcome of the conference was that we, as volunteer Friends, connected with one another on a personal level; sharing our stories and regenerating our enthusiasm to continue our work on behalf of our refuges. We can make a difference!



Friends on the Hill 2009

Nancy McKlveen Wins Conservation Award

By Robin Fortney and Karen Viste-Sparkman, Refuge Biologist

Friends of the Prairie Learning Center member and volunteer Nancy McKlveen recently won the Zone Conservation Award from the Garden Club of America for her work with the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center. Nancy represented the Des Moines Founders Garden Club at the first meeting of individuals and organizations interested in forming a Friends group for the refuge in 1993. Nancy's enthusiasm for plants and conservation were a perfect match for the refuge's purpose of restoring prairie. She worked tirelessly to support the fledgling organization, serving as secretary-treasurer of the steering committee and the newly established Friends group, and later as treasurer. Nancy was the ad hoc membership committee chair as well, helping to increase memberships from 68 in 1994 to nearly 400 three years later.

Nancy shared her passion for the Friends group with family, friends, and through involvement in other organizations. The Des Moines Founders Garden Club funded a refuge trail guide that was published in 1997. Nancy also involved the Garden Club in the Partners for Plants program. For the last several years, members of the club have made regular trips to the refuge to take part in activities such as seed collection, seed cleaning, and transplanting seedlings in the greenhouse.

The enthusiasm Nancy feels for the refuge is obvious, and we are fortunate for her contributions. Nancy helped plant real prairie seeds as well as the seeds of a successful Friends group. She is one of a handful of recipients for this award last year and very deserving of this national recognition. Congratulations, Nancy!



*Clockwise from behind the bison:
Des Moines Founders Garden Club members Sharon Nelson-
Vaux, Peggy Jester, Nancy McKlveen, Judi Pruchnicki, Teresa
Jenson, and Refuge biologist, Karen Viste-Sparkman*

Upcoming Events at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge!

Earth Day – April 18
Migratory Bird Day – May 9
Birding Classes – May 9, May 30, June 13, June 27, July 11
Butterfly Count – July 11
Monarch Madness – September 12
Buffalo Day / Public Lands Day - September 26
Ding Darling Day – October 10

Linking Girls to the Land

By Hallie Rasmussen, Park Ranger



It was an unseasonably warm and sunny day on March 15, the day chosen to celebrate the birthday of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the establishment of the Girl Scouts. With over 30 people in attendance, the girls explored the wonders of the prairie by identifying signs of life and learning about the diversity of plants and animals. We even found an owl pellet right in the middle of the trail, as if it was planted there! Upon dissection, we found small vole bones and a skull. The girls were stewards of the prairie by helping us transplant over 500 plants in our greenhouse.

Linking Girls to the Land (LGTTL) is a partnership between Girl Scouts of the USA's Elliott Wildlife Values Project and federal natural resource agencies, initiatives and partnering organizations. LGTTL builds in girls the courage, confidence and character to make the world a better place. Each year, over 35,000 girls work collaboratively with federal natural resource agencies to develop leadership skills through learning activities that help them:

- *Discover* a strong sense of self, positive values, and an understanding of their important role in caring for the environment and our Earth's natural resources
- *Connect* with nature, the outdoors and their local and global communities
- *Take Action* to identify community and environmental needs, positively impact the environment and educate and inspire others to act as stewards of our Earth

Earth Day 2009

By Al Murray, Volunteer Coordinator



In April, the weather warms, the grasses begin to green, the birds begin to return to their summer range, and volunteers flock to the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge to participate in our annual observation of Earth Day. This year's spring Prairie Rescue Day will be held on Saturday, April 18, from 9:00 a.m. to noon.

Earth Day is an international event designed to draw attention to environmental issues. At the Refuge we anticipate having up to 150 volunteers representing various church, civic, scouting, and family groups, as well as individuals volunteering with numerous stewardship projects throughout the refuge.

Program participants will enjoy a lunch of barbeque beef sandwiches provided by the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center and they will receive an event patch. If you are affiliated with a group or would just like to be involved, please contact Ranger Al Murray at the refuge at (515) 994-3400.

International Migratory Bird Day

By Hallie Rasmussen, Park Ranger



Mark your calendars! This year we will celebrate International Migratory Bird Day on Saturday, May 9, from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. With events ranging from bird hikes to making bird crafts at our crafts station, it is a great way to kick off spring and celebrate the warmer months to come. The 2009 Iowa Junior Duck Stamp Award Ceremony will begin at 10:30 a.m.

This year's theme is "Celebrating Birds in Culture." Birds have always been important to native people. They are found in storytelling, art, music, dance, spirituality, food, and much more. For example, birds are found in some of the earliest cave art, feathers have been used to add beauty and meaning in the creation of ceremonial objects, and some native cultures believed birds carried messages to the spirits. These are just a few examples of how important birds are and have been to culture.

We would love to have you and your families join us to celebrate this wonderful event and we hope to see you there! For more information or questions, contact Hallie Rasmussen at 515/994-3400.

Beginning Birding Course at the Refuge

By Cheryl Groom, Visitor Services Manager

Have you wanted to begin bird-watching but didn't know where to start? With help from volunteers, Refuge staff are presenting a Beginning Birding course. This five class session will give you the knowledge you need to start enjoying the wonderful world of birds!

Space is limited so registration is required. Please contact Cheryl Groom at 515-994-3400 or Cheryl_groom@fws.gov to register.

Locations: Neal Smith NWR Prairie Learning & Visitor Center (Presentations)
Tallgrass Trail, Savanna Trail, other (Field Trips)

Schedule: 0900 to 1200 on five Saturdays in May, June, and July
(Most sessions will begin with a two-hour field trip and conclude with a one-hour presentation)

Presentation Sessions:

Intro to Birding (May 9, Karen Viste-Sparkman)

- Bird Anatomy
- Binoculars
- Use of Field Guides
- Internet Resources

Bird Habitats (May 30, Dennis Thompson)

- Prairie, Savanna, and Other Habitats
- Impact of Habitat Loss on Bird Species
- Backyard Habitat
- Other

Birding by Ear (June 13, Mark Bowman)

- Grouping Birds by Sound
- Ear Training
- Field Practice
- Resources

Identifying Bird Traits (June 27, Bob Vanersvelde)

- Silhouettes
- Flight Patterns
- Other Behaviors

Early Bird Field Trip (July 11, Karen Viste-Sparkman)

2009 Iowa Junior Duck Stamp Contest

By Doreen Van Ryswyk



The 2009 Iowa Junior Duck Stamp judging was held on Wednesday, March 25. There were 364 total entries. After four hours of deliberation, a winner was named. Alicia Borton, a 17-year-old from Clemons was the winner. Her entry depicted a pair of mallards done in oil paint. Photos that she took while at a pond by a local cemetery were her inspiration. Her entry will be sent to Washington, D.C. to compete against all other best of show winners from across the nation. The judging will be held at the National Postal Museum on Wednesday, April 22, at 10:30 a.m. We wish Alicia the best of luck in DC!

Ron Van Nimwegen Memorial

By Diane Debinski, Professor, Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Iowa State University



It is with great sadness that I relay news of the passing of Ron Van Nimwegen. Ron was a non-traditional student who came back to Iowa State University to finish his undergraduate after many years as a restaurant owner and manager. I first met him when he volunteered to assist with the regal fritillary prairie restoration project at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. I was immediately impressed by Ron's commitment to conservation issues, especially those related to prairie reconstruction.

Ron's graduate research at ISU focused on assessing landscape effects on yellow warbler nesting success in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. He then moved to Kansas State University and was working toward a Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology where he was studying habitat selection in the northern grasshopper mouse (*Onychomys leucogaster*). As a graduate student, Ron dove headfirst into research and teaching while excelling at both. He loved quantitative analysis and became extremely well-versed in GIS, satellite imagery analysis, and statistics. He frequently worked long into the night analyzing on his own data or helping another student complete a project. He was very generous with his skills and was a true friend to fellow graduate students.

Ron as an Intern in 2001

In the field, Ron had a particular skill for noticing things that most people never would have seen. This came in handy when he conducted research. As an example, one day we were standing at the edge of a willow looking for yellow warbler nestlings when we realized the birds we were looking for had gotten out of the nest and were sitting on a twig right in front of our faces. We drew in our breath and were amazed at how close they were and yet not making a sound. We had been looking past them because they blended into the vegetation! It was Ron who would notice those kinds of things. His photos also speak to his ability to capture the beauty of nature.

Ron always had a glimmer in his eye for the odd joke. When I think of Ron, I can still hear his low chuckle after he told a joke or made a humorous observation. He looked at life and found humor. We feel a major loss in his early departure from this world. But we'll think of him the next time we see a yellow warbler go by . . .

Ron felt a real connection to the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. Ron's family has graciously suggested that memorial contributions be made to the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center in care of the Yorgensen-Meloan-Londeen Funeral Home, 1616 Poyntz Ave., Manhattan, KS 66502.

Friends Annual Scholarship

By Joan Van Gorp, Board Member, Friends of the PLC

Friends of the Prairie Learning Center has announced a \$1,000 annual scholarship program for a graduating student from Prairie City-Monroe (PCM) High School. One student each year will be awarded the scholarship. New scholarships will be awarded annually.

Students winning the award may re-apply for up to four years total. Requirements are based on high school academic records, college academic achievement and the understanding that the student work toward a 2 or 4-year degree in conservation or environmental related studies. Deadline for applications is April 17, 2009.

Joan Van Gorp, Friends Board Member and Prairie City resident worked with PCM Guidance Counselor, Casey McMurray, in developing the program.

“We are very pleased that the Friends can give back to the local community for all their support. We also hope that with this scholarship more young people will consider a career in conservation and environmental related areas,” says Joan Van Gorp, Friends Board Member.

The scholarship will be bundled under the Dollars for Scholars Program. First year administration will be managed by the Monroe State Bank. Subsequent years will be managed by the Friends Board of Directors and the community college/college/university the student attends.

For full requirements and an application, contact Casey McMurray, PCM Guidance Counselor, (641) 259-2315 or cmcurray@pcmonroe.k12.ia.us

Come Grow With Us

The power of a Friends group is its members. We represent a variety of interests, talents and financial support allowing the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center to meet its mission and goals. We encourage you to renew your support or become a new Friend by completing the membership form below. Friends of the Prairie Learning Center is a nonprofit organization and all donations are tax deductible.

____ \$25 -- Big Bluestem Friend ____ \$50 -- Buffalo Buddy
____ \$100 -- Savannah Saver ____ \$250 -- Prairie Patron
____ Other -- \$ _____

Be sure to find out if your company will match contributions.

Please circle one.

New Member

Renewal

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Date _____

E-mail _____

Mail to: Friends of The Prairie Learning Center, PO Box 399, Prairie City, Iowa 50228.

New Partner School Program

By Cheryl Groom, Visitor Services Manager

The *Refuge Partner Schools Program* is an approach that provides teachers and students with multidisciplinary, standard-based curriculum that includes hands-on, real-life experiences with plants and wildlife, as well as recreational opportunities to immerse students in nature throughout the seasons. Participating schools visit the refuge at least one time each school year (three times when funding becomes available) for ranger-led lessons and activities. While the *Program* reaches a wide audience of students, the emphasis is on diverse youth, and typically involves the entire student body from kindergarten through grade 5.

The younger grades learn the basics – camouflage and animals, bison facts, basic plant parts, etc., and with each year, build on what they have learned, culminating with the older grades participating in one of the new research based areas.

Partner Schools are also encouraged, with the assistance of Refuge staff, to create native habitat at their school. One school already has a 30' x 30' plot that was planted in May 2008!

Refuge Partner Schools will be eligible for busing assistance through the Prairie Passage Bus Fund, managed by the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center, once this fund is established.

Each *Partner School* commits to the following:

1. Teachers will bring all students in grades K - 5 to the refuge at least one time during the school year—three times once the Prairie Passage bus fund is established.
2. Students will participate in at least one outdoor recreation experience as part of their partnership year. These activities may include bird watching, hiking, or nature photography. Teachers will select the activities most appropriate for their students and the season.
3. The school administrator will send at least one teacher to an environmental education or natural resource training workshop hosted by the refuge during the partnership year. Refuge staff will provide partner schools with refuge workshop opportunities as well as inform them about other environmental education workshop options within Iowa.
4. Teachers will include a refuge special event in their school year such as the Junior Duck Stamp Art Contest (information to be provided by refuge staff), monarch tagging, or other special event or incorporate refuge staff and field trip activities into a school special event such as a Science Fair.
5. Teachers will participate in both student and program evaluations as requested by refuge staff.

The Refuge will to:

1. Provide sponsorship of all field trip busing expenses incurred as part of this partnership agreement. The funds will be managed by the Friends of the Prairie Learning Center.
2. Plan and host one *Partnership Family* event each season for partner school students and their families.
3. Assist partner teachers with scheduling and planning each refuge field trip.
4. Provide environmental education activities that meet curriculum standards and supplement classroom learning for each grade level.
5. Help teachers incorporate one meaningful stewardship project for each grade level that directly benefits the habitats and wildlife of the refuge and also provides additional opportunities for student learning and the development of a conservation ethic.
6. Provide each partner school with one pre-field trip visit per classroom before each refuge visit.

Two schools have signed on as *Partner Schools*, Stowe Elementary and the Meskwaki Settlement School, and two additional schools are reviewing the agreement and working with staff to become Partner Schools.

A Message from the Friends President

By Mark Lyle

Education is important to all of us. At the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, educating citizens about wildlife, ecosystems and preserving both are high on the list.

To support that idea, the Refuge hosts school tours, teacher workshops and outreach training with local organizations. Inside this edition is exciting news about the new Partner School Program.

The Friends of the Prairie Learning Center Board of Directors has established a sub-committee to develop a college scholarship program for students from the Prairie City – Monroe High School who will pursue a conservation/wildlife major. Detailed information is outlined in this edition.

Prairie Wind

is published by the
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Prairie Learning
Center**

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Prairie Wind is a newsletter about the activities of the Friends and the Prairie Learning Center/Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. To subscribe, send your name and address to Friends of the Prairie Learning Center, P.O. Box 399, Prairie City, Iowa 50228.

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the Prairie Learning Center
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