

Prairie Wind

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WINTER 2009-10

Extreme Birding: Neal Smith Christmas Bird Count

By Karen Viste-Sparkman, Refuge Biologist



Photo by Jay Gilliam

If you don't remember January 2, 2010, talk to one of the 17 volunteers who participated in the Neal Smith Christmas Bird Count. I'm sure they will remember the day they spent counting birds in sub-zero temperatures. I know I will. I keep using words like "dedicated," "brave," "intrepid," or "hard-core" to describe these people, but maybe "insane" or "foolish" would be more appropriate. When I started checking the forecast on Tuesday, it said the high on Saturday would be about 12 degrees F. It kept getting worse as the week went on. Actually, the day started out at -18, and the high on the refuge was -4. It was the kind of Saturday you'd prefer to stay in bed under the covers where it's warm. I expected a lot of people to cancel or just not show up, but was surprised and impressed that the volunteers actually came willing and able to brave the elements.

As far as the birding—well, it was a little slow. Usually we spend the morning primarily on foot, walking and looking for birds in different areas around the refuge. This year most groups tried walking short distances but soon gave up, finding few birds. Not only was it cold, but the heavy snow made walking difficult and noisy, so birds couldn't be heard. In addition, there were technical difficulties related to the cold, like binoculars and eyeglasses fogging up, stiff plastic lens covers, stiff joints, and icicles on one's eyelashes. (I am not making this up!) So we spent the rest of the morning driving roads on and around the refuge looking for birds. Any bird found within 7.5 miles of the center of the count circle was identified and counted. Obviously we didn't see them all. The data will be analyzed by the National Audubon Society and they take into account the number of observers, the number of hours and the miles walked or driven. We also report conditions such as temperature, wind, open water, and snow cover. The count data can be used to track changes in bird populations, as people all over the world count birds in designated circles on a selected date between December 14 and January 5.

On this year's Neal Smith count, the most abundant species found were Dark-eyed Junco (197), House Sparrow (190), Horned Lark (162), and American Tree Sparrow (100). Some of the most unusual species found this year were a Red-headed Woodpecker, a Red-breasted Nuthatch, an American Robin, two White-throated Sparrows, a Harris' Sparrow, two Snow Buntings, thirteen Lapland Longspurs, a Common Grackle, three Brown-headed Cowbirds, and four Purple Finches. These species have each been found five or fewer years over the 14 years this count has taken place. Species found in highest numbers recorded for that species during the count were Eurasian Collared-doves (5), Horned Lark (162), and House Finch (23). Many of these birds were visiting bird feeders, which seem to be especially popular this year since the cold temperatures and heavy snow cover have

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made it harder for birds to find food. A large flock of Horned Larks was near some spilled corn. Among regularly occurring species, it was the second biggest year for Ring-necked Pheasants and Blue Jays, third highest for House Sparrows, and fourth highest for Northern Cardinals and Dark-eyed Juncos. A Short-eared Owl was seen the week of the count, but not on count day. Some of the biggest misses this year were Wild Turkey, Cooper's Hawk, Northern Harrier, and Brown Creeper, which have all been seen on eight or nine of the Neal Smith Christmas Bird Counts. We did not have any waterfowl, since there wasn't much open water to be found.

While it is interesting to track bird numbers, one of the great things about the Christmas Bird Count is the fellowship. Birders of all skill levels participate and are put in teams so that there is at least one experienced birder in each group. For some, it is their first experience with some of the species, and for others, it is one of many Christmas Bird Counts that they did this year. We keep it pretty short at Neal Smith, and finish by noon with a hot lunch. This year Joan Van Gorp prepared some delicious soup for the participants. It is a fun experience, despite the weather, and now the participants have a story to tell about the day we went out in the cold to count birds. If we'd stayed in bed where it was warm, it wouldn't have been very memorable. Thanks to the 17 brave (crazy?) souls who participated in this year's count!



Photo by Jay Gilliam

Colleen Nell - Public Use Intern



My name is Colleen Nell and I have been working as a STEP student with Hallie Rasmussen since the end of last summer. I am a bit of a distance from my home; Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, a direct suburb of Milwaukee but find comfort in being away from such a large city. I currently attend Drake University in Des Moines during the week while working on the prairie almost every weekend. I am in my junior year at Drake studying Environmental Science and Politics with a minor in Biology and a concentration in Primatology. I am not exactly sure what direction I am going with this workload, but I have concentrated my focus towards wildlife conservation. I am excited to be travelling to the rainforests of Costa Rica this coming spring semester for school. I will be studying

Tropical Ecology and Conservation Biology while I am there. Fortunately, I will be returning in time for the summer fun here on the prairie.

I look forward to seeing the flowers bloom, bringing life to the prairie again, and getting some hands-on experience when I return. I am appreciative that such a beautiful place exists within reason of my university to provide me with opportunities like this. I hope to take the most of my experiences on the prairie to further wildlife restoration in my future.

Smoke Spotter Training

By Jim Krizman, Prescribed Fire Specialist



We need your help! Smoke spotters/flaggers are now officially required for prescribed burns by Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Smoke Management Guidelines. The FWS has developed these guidelines for use in prescribed burn planning and implementation in order to adhere to federal and state laws governing traffic control. These guidelines are based on the Code of Federal Regulations which adopts the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices as the national standard for all traffic control devices installed on any street, highway, or bikeway open to public travel. Wow that is a mouth full! Basically the short of it is, it is the law. Where smoke is going to impact the roadway or cause a distraction to traffic, we need flaggers. No flaggers, no burn. This will be written into all burn

plans where smoke is an issue or could be an issue to traffic and the safety of firefighters or public. This is where volunteers come in. You have helped us and continue to help us. We cannot do this without you. Staff is required to carry out the burns. We cannot really spare staff to be flaggers/spotters. We need you!

Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge is having a flagger and smoke spotter training on February 27, 2010, from 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. This will include Department of Transportation flagger training from Tom Macdonald of Iowa State University. This segment will last approximately 3.5 hours and will cover policy, rules, sign placement, and much more. The next segment will cover specific prescribed fire duties such as radio use, smoke monitoring, taking weather observations, and what to do in different situations. Basic tactics will also be covered so spotters can better understand what is going on and help in situational awareness and decision making abilities. We will also discuss scheduling and call up. Time will also be allotted for questions and answers.

If you are interested, please come and take the training. We are hoping for 15 flaggers/spotters at a minimum. Please call 515/994-3400 to sign up or if you have questions.

Upcoming Events for 2010

- March 14:** Linking Girls to the Land – stewardship day for Girl Scouts
- April 17:** Earth Day – public stewardship day
- May 8:** International Migratory Bird Day and Junior Duck Stamp Celebration
- September 11:** Monarch Madness – public monarch tagging day
- September 25:** Buffalo Day/Public Lands Day
- October 2:** Volunteer Bus Trip
- October 9:** Ding Darling Day – public stewardship day
- November 6:** Volunteer Recognition Dinner

Remember to keep checking at the visitor center and on our website www.tallgrass.org for more events throughout the year.

Bison Roundup 2009

By Karen Viste-Sparkman, Refuge Biologist



As the herd of 73 bison waited nervously in the bison handling facility on a misty November morning, 26 volunteers and employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service arrived at the scene to begin the process that we call the roundup. The bison had actually been confined in the facility two days earlier, when the main family group followed the truck carrying minerals and alfalfa into the pen. The scattered bulls were then herded using several refuge trucks to gently move them toward the drive fence. Eventually they got a sense that someone was trying to make them do something that might not be in their best interests, so they bolted.

However, by then they were surrounded by vehicles and some quick driving maneuvers gave them no choice but to move through the drive lane into the corral. They were given food and water until the day of the roundup, November 18.

That morning, the bison were separated through a series of gates, where they were divided into smaller groups until they were down to only one individual per compartment. Each bison was moved through and funneled into the narrow alley where it stood on a scale. A scanner on a pole was rubbed behind the left ear until a microchip was detected identifying the animal. If a microchip was not found, the animal was sent to the squeeze chute for processing. Every animal had its weight and condition recorded using a hand-held computer in the scale area, and then it was either sent to the squeeze chute for sampling, or returned to “freedom.”

The roundup had several purposes. One of the main goals was to take DNA samples and implant microchips in all of this year’s calves. DNA samples consist of blood and tail hair. All of the adults have had this done in the past, so we are able to identify these animals by running a scanner behind their ear. We track the animal’s condition and use the genetic information to manage the herd. We will try to keep a representative number of all bison genes in the herd. Should we need to remove animals from the herd, we will be sure our herd has a diversity of genetic material. The DNA samples collected during the roundup provide the information we need to accomplish this.



Another purpose of the roundup was to test a random sample of adults for disease. The animals to be tested were selected prior to the roundup using their unique microchip number. When they were scanned, the computer indicated if the animal was selected to be sampled for disease. In addition, any bison in poor condition was flagged for disease testing. These bison were sent to the squeeze chute to have blood samples taken before being released.

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Sometimes even in adult bison, a microchip could not be detected when the bison was scanned. These bison were also sent to the squeeze chute, where the microchip could sometimes be found. If not, another genetic sample of blood and tail hair was collected and a new microchip inserted under the skin.

This year's roundup was exceptionally successful by all measures. Every animal in the herd was captured and processed. The bison appeared to be in good condition overall. It is easy for visitors who drive through the bison enclosure to forget that bison are wild animals, but if you see them during a roundup it is obvious that these are not domestic livestock! Because of the combination of their strength, fear, and stress, it is easy for the bison to become injured during handling by crashing into an object like a fence or another bison. This can cause broken horns, bleeding, and other injuries. It is also easy for people to get injured despite all of the precautions we take. This year's handling of the animals went so smoothly that the bison stayed remarkably calm (considering they are wild animals) and there were no major injuries to bison or people.

We will repeat the process next year and hope for the same success. Until then, the bison will be left alone to peacefully graze the prairie.

Youth and Natural Resources Working Meeting

By Hallie Rasmussen, Park Ranger

In December, I had the opportunity to speak on a panel at a "Youth and Natural Resources" working meeting. Secretary of the Interior Salazar's goal with the "youth and careers in nature" initiative is to recruit talented and capable youth into the field of natural resources and re-invigorate the workforce. The meeting brought together a committee of folks dedicated to brainstorming and carrying out a plan to get this initiative off the ground.

As part of the youth panel, myself and other young professionals in the field (or about to enter the field) offered our ideas and insights on how to reach today's youth. One young individual who had worked through the Student Career Association (SCA) was introduced to a new field he was not aware of because he simply had not been exposed to the field of natural resources. He is now a passionate advocate and is educating other urban youth about these opportunities. It is experiences like these that will get our youth involved in natural resources and it is comforting to know that the Secretary of the Interior recognizes this importance and is taking actions to reach our youth.

2010 Federal Junior Duck Stamp Contest



It's time to get entries in for the 2010 Federal Junior Duck Stamp Contest. If you know a student in grades kindergarten through twelfth, tell them about the contest. Entries for the Iowa contest must be postmarked by March 15. The entry form and regulations can be found at: www.fws.gov/juniorduck. If you have any questions, please call 515/994-3400 or email Doreen_vanryswyk@fws.gov.

Nancy Retires!



At a staff gathering in December, Refuge Manager Nancy Gilbertson, was honored for her service to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Nancy's supervisor, Matt Sprenger (shown with Nancy at left), from the Regional Office in Fort Snelling, presented her with a plaque.



Volunteer Beat

By Al Murray, Volunteer Coordinator

As we look toward 2010 with optimism, it's nice to also reflect on the accomplishments of the past year. Once again, volunteer contributions played a significant role in our ongoing efforts to reconstruct tallgrass prairie, contributing over 16,500 hours of service.

Volunteers worked alongside staff and supported the Biology, Operations and Visitors Services programs. Volunteers assisted with many functions at the refuge to include but not limited to: bookstore, seed collection, seed lab, smoke spotting, greenhouse, Adopt-a-Trail, and research assistants.

In October volunteers also enjoyed an opportunity to participate in the annual bus trip. This year it included a canoe trip down the Des Moines River west of Boone. In November, the staff had an opportunity to recognize the commitment of our volunteers by hosting our annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner. In addition to the meal and awards ceremony, participants enjoyed a competitive game of refuge Jeopardy.

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.

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Bookstore Update

By Carl Nollen, Bookstore Manager

New merchandise, and especially new books, arrive at the Prairie Point Bookstore all the time! Here are some of the titles to be found:

Watching Bison in North America, Wild World Series by L. Patricia Kite. \$8.00, 32 pages, ages 4-8, paperback. A series book that introduces wild animals, showing where they live and how they move, feed and grow up.

American Bison, A Scary Prediction, by William Caper. \$15.95 (\$10 below retail), 32 pages, ages 9-12, hardcover. A story about William Temple Hornaday and his quest to find the millions of wild American bison that once roamed the plains.

The Extermination of the American Bison, by William T. Hornaday. \$25.99, 305 pages, paperback, large print, 2008 reprint of 1889. The author of this book is a native of Knoxville, Iowa. He was instrumental in saving the bison from extinction. In 1886, he went to Montana to find bison for the National Museum in Washington, D.C. He became director of the Bronx Zoo in 1896, where he stayed the next 30 years. He was president of the American Bison Society, 1907-1910, and did much to save bison. This book has many chapters about bison not available in most books in print today. He also describes details of his 1886 exploration, with vintage illustrations from the original book.

The Destruction of the Bison, an Environmental History, 1750-1920, by Andrew Isenberg. \$23.99, 206 pages, paperback. A scholarly treatment showing the grassland environment of the Great Plains and the Native American nomadic way of life, and how those factors relate to bison.

Dance in a Buffalo Skull, by Zitkala-Sa. \$11.95, 32 pages, ages 4-8, hardcover. Both author and illustrator are Sioux Indians. Tale of danger and survival on the prairies of the Great Plains. Beautifully illustrated book, winning both the Aesop's Accolade & Mom's Choice Award medals.

The Magic Field, by Herbert G. Troester, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. \$4.00, 32 pages, paperback. A colorful story of a prairie burn with children discovering things discovered after the burn and watching the landscape change in a few weeks to beautiful grasses and wildflowers.

Deep Nature, Photographs From Iowa, by Linda & Robert Scarth. \$29.95, 105 pages, hardcover. Reveals miniature beauties hidden among the patches of prairie, woodland, and wetland that remain in Iowa's overdeveloped landscape. The 75 color photographs give a breathtaking cross section of the state's smallest inhabitants.

Enchanted by Prairie, by Bill Witt. \$29.95, 88 pages, hardcover. An essay by Witt & also by Osha Gray Davidson, 2009. Includes a photograph of a bison and calf taken at the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. "A photographic meditation on place and how the experience of prairie affects us."

The Sunflower Family in the Upper Midwest, A Photographic Guide to the Asteraceae in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, by Thomas Antonio & Susanne Masi. \$48.00, 419 pages, hardcover. Two pages of 150 different species representing 55 genera. With 544 photographs & range maps for each species. There is no finer book for our conspicuous and colorful sunflowers!

Hanging Out in Bur Oak. During the 1930's Depression, Bootleggers, The Draft, & World War II, by Neal Smith. \$21.95, 162 pages, hardcover. Congressman Smith wrote this book to remind people of the hard times of the 1930's, known as the Great Depression. He has a great passion for the under-privileged. The town of Bur Oak in this book is fictitious, although it represents Packwood, Iowa, where Smith grew up. The story revolves around several boys in their early teens and their lives and times in that era.

A Message from the Friends President

By Mark Lyle

I hope you all had a safe and happy holiday. Closing out 2009, we made some remarkable accomplishments at the refuge.

Projects undertaken by the Friends included:

- Provided 8 interns to the refuge
- Announced a \$1,000 scholarship program for one Prairie City-Monroe High School graduate
- Initiated a bus funding program with the refuge Partner Schools allowing more students the opportunity to visit the refuge
- Sponsored an open house at the refuge intended to update federal, state and local officials on the progress of the Rothinghouse Estate purchase by the FWS

The upcoming year promises to have many of the same programs with a focus on expanding the rapport between local citizens, the Friends and refuge staff. Thank you for your support.

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