

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

REFUGE UPDATE

Presented at the Lake Onalaska Protection and Rehabilitation District Annual Meeting

August 30, 2023

Biology/Management projects

- **New Wildlife Biologist and Seasonal Biotechs:** Quantit Ali began his role as the new La Crosse District Wildlife Biologist in April of this year. Quantit comes to the La Crosse District from serving as the Wildlife Biologist at Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Abby Mueller and Celia Schwartz also joined the La Crosse District Biology team this spring and summer as seasonal biotech, assisting with wildlife/plant surveys, invasive treatments and sign posting.



- **Flowering Rush Surveys:** Flowering Rush is an aquatic invasive plant that when emergent looks like native rushes, and when submersed appears like native wild celery. It is cryptic unless flowering during low-water summers. It reproduces through seeds, root bulbils (little root pods that float), and broken root systems. It is highly mobile and readily reroots/resprouts when disturbed by boats, dredging, wildlife, drawdowns and floods. It was discovered in Pool 8 in mid-June 2020, and mapping efforts by USFWS, WI/MNDNRS and LTRM staff followed. Some minor control efforts were completed in late summer 2022. Surveys were completed in mid June 2023 on Pools 7 and 8. Clumps of flowering rush have been detected on Lake Onalaska near the chutes between Dresbach and the Lake. Since discovery these infestations have been drastically expanding.



- **Invasive Phragmites Treatments on Pool 7 and 8:** Patches of invasive phragmites were chemically treated on Pools 7 and 8 in the La Crosse District by a contractor under an invasive species grant in August 2023.
- **Reforestation Work:** Floodplain forest trees and shrubs were planted on island on the District this season. Efforts concentrated on filling in gaps on islands with tree mortality or patches of reed canary grass. Trees were planted on islands in Pool 8 and in the Black River Bottoms Pool 7. Efforts also concentrated on restoring flood plain forest species on a newly acquired land tract in Trempealeau County. As a reminder we are in the season of tree nuts and we are always looking for volunteers to help us collect acorns and other seeds for nursery stock. Contact Bruce Henry bruce_henry@fws.gov or Katie Julian katherine_julian@fws.gov.



- **Prairie Brice Prairie and Midway Prairie:** In 2023 refuge staff conducted a 70 acre prescribed burn on the Brice Prairie Tract Northern Unit. This burn was planned to be 90 plus acres but had to be halted due to change in conditions. Woody plants will be treated as well in 2023 using mowing and herbicides. Staff also completed woody plant and invasives treatments on Midway Prairie State Natural Area.

- **Forest Inventory:** in 2023, Biotechs and Foresters continued to monitor forest conditions on the refuge by conducting surveys on Forest Inventory plots on the refuge. Staff also participated in a joint agency survey of forest mortality on the refuge complex.
- **Upper Halfway Creek Marsh Repairs:** A team under the Great American Outdoors Act, repaired the dike on Pool A by installing muskrat fencing. This fencing prevents muskrat damage to the dike system.
- **2023 Flood Damage:** Refuge staff surveyed flood damage caused by the spring flooding event. The water control structure at Long Lake (Pool 7) was completely silted in, however the structure survived over topping. Repair work is needed to get this structure back to functioning. Other damages included roads, landings and docks and some minor damages to jetties and other rock structures.



- **Slow No Wake Posting and other sign maintenance** – It’s that time of year to get out and make sure refuge signs are visible and the “slow no wake”/”voluntary avoidance areas” and “Closed to Migratory Bird Hunting areas” are marked before the start of the waterfowl season.



- **Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Areas-** Staff will be deploying the buoys on Lake Onalaska for the Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area. Waterfowl need a place to rest

and refuge to feed and gain necessary resources for migration. Please help us by avoiding this area from October 15 to the end of state duck hunting season.

Wildlife update!

- **Black Tern Surveys:** Staff completed monitoring surveys for Black Terns nesting on the Refuge. Survey work was completed in Blue/Target and Lawrence Lakes in Pool 8. Nesting for these birds seemed to be a couple weeks later than usual this year.



- **Waterfowl Counts** –Fall migration waterfowl counts will be conducted in the Pool 8 Goose Island Closed Area this year.
- **Waterfowl Disturbance Monitoring on Lake Onalaska Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area:** USGS will be continuing a study to monitor disturbance to resting/feeding waterfowl using the Lake Onalaska Voluntary Waterfowl Avoidance Area. We ask the public to please avoid the area marked with the buoys from October 15th to the end of the state duck season.
- **Bat Surveys:** In 2023 bat detectors were deployed on the District. Data collected supports a better understanding of bat use of refuge habitats. Bats in the Midwest have been experiencing population declines due factors like the fungus “white nosed syndrome”. In March of 2023 Northern Long-eared bats were listed as Endangered, a status change from Threatened and are known to use the refuge habitats along the river. Understanding bat use of the refuge will help managers better plan projects that support bat use including forest management practices.



Visitor Services projects

- **New Refuge Rangers:** Steve Bodovinitz joined the La Crosse District Visitor Service team as a term Refuge Ranger. Steve has been active in helping provide outreach, Visitor Center operations, hunt programs, promoting the Visitor Center and sign replacements. Kathryn McSorley also joined the La Crosse District Visitor Service team as a seasonal Refuge Ranger. Kathryn has been providing Visitor Center operations assistance and outreach programs including programing about the geology of the Driftless Region.



- **Volunteers:** 56 volunteers contributed more than 1500 volunteer hours, assisting with welcoming visitors at the Visitor Center, helping with interpretive programs, garden workdays and invasive species workdays, tree planting, acorn collecting and more!



Photo: Volunteers pose with trash bags full of invasive species removed from the Lake O. Overlook May 2023.

- **Environmental Education:** We hosted more than 1550 participants in environmental education programs, most of which was Ranger-led programming (rather than self-led visits) (up 350% since last year!)
- **Interpretation:** More than 1,150 people attended interpretive programs (including “naturalists on deck” at the Brownsville Overlook)
- **Interp/Outreach/Special Events –**
 - Kathryn will be hosted a Driftless Geology interpretive program on Sat. August 19. This program will be offered again in the evening this September at the Visitor Center! Katie will lead another prairie walk for Sierra Club members in September.
 - Ranger Steve brought materials to Onalaska Community Days (August 4) and interacted with 89 participants. Hallie led programs for 100 family participants at Mississippi River Adventure Days in Prairie du Chien (put on by the Prairie du Chien Rotary Club), and Youth Outdoor Fest in La Crosse.
- **Bark Ranger Program:** The District started a new program calling all responsible dogs using the refuge with their owners to become “Bark Rangers” This program is designed for dogs and their owners to use the refuge trails responsibly by keeping their dogs leashed and picking up their waste when using the trails. Dogs were given cool bandanas and a certificate with their paw print stamped as a signature.



- **100th Anniversary Celebration Planning:** Refuge Districts have been making plans for special outreach events to celebrate Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge 100th Anniversary next year 2024. Some of the activities being planned for the La Crosse District include an Outdoor Adventure Challenge, using the refuge and adjacent trail systems: paddling, biking and run/walking along with an outreach event at the Visitor Center. For updates on the 100th Anniversary for the Refuge Complex: <https://www.uppermiss100.com/>.



- **Visitor Center:** Federal recreational lands passes continue to be in high demand – we’ve issued more than 300 passes since January, including more than 100 lifetime veterans passes, 50 annual passes, 80+ senior passes. Thanks to volunteer Ed’s efforts to promote the passes at Harley stores, we had to order more motorcycle decals! Visitation to the Visitor Center has been up this year with great weather and more travelers following the pandemic. Current Visitor Center Summer hours: Tuesday-Saturday 9:00 am to 3:00 pm and Fall Winter hours Starting November Tuesday-Friday 9:00am to 3:00pm
- **Volunteers Needed:** Visitor Center Volunteers, staffing the front desk, welcoming visitors, sharing info. **Seed collection:** Volunteers needed to find and collect tree seeds for nursery stock and restoration projects on the refuge. Contact Katie Julian: 608-779-2391 or Katherine.julian@fws.gov.

