

March 2014

Volume 2 Issue 3



## Stewards of the Upper Mississippi River Refuge



### Inside this issue:

<i>Backwater Birding with Bob</i>	2
<i>Jr. Stewards Chatter</i>	2
<i>Flash Point - Connie Inskeep</i>	3
<i>"Operation Canvasback" by Ed Britton</i>	4
<i>Sightings around the Refuge by the Stewards</i>	6
<i>More Sightings Around the Refuge</i>	7
<i>"Cool Visitors From the North"</i>	8
<i>Schedule of Events and Membership Form</i>	9
<i>Think Spring—Golf Cart Tours</i>	10

### Welcome New Members

**Joseph Tollari**

**Michael Martin**



Canvasback by Anne Straight

## Message From The President

What a winter it's been! For the first time in quite a few years it has been a winter like the ones I remember as a kid. Bald Eagle viewing in this area, around Lock and Dam 13 and 14 on the Mississippi River have been nothing short of spectacular this year, but with warmer temperatures that will soon come to an end. We are still hoping for some great eagle viewing as they make their way up river to their northern homes. Soon the ice will be breaking loose and the hundreds of Bald Eagles still south of us will begin their trek back north. All of the scheduled tours have passed, so I will be adding a couple more dates in the very near future including one this Saturday, March 15th at Lost

Mound Unit. It may be one of the last chances to see these magnificent birds in large numbers as long as the weather cooperates this week and the Mississippi opens up. Please keep checking the website and Facebook page for added dates for tours. With the passing of the Bald Eagles, warmer weather will start bringing back all of our other migratory birds and waterfowl. I have already encountered a group of about twelve Trumpeter Swans, fifty American White Pelicans, and hundreds of Canada Geese sitting in snow-covered frozen fields waiting for Spring. I am anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Great Blue Herons to the rookery just outside of the Savanna city limits in hopes of seeing them arrive like I did last year on March 15th. It



Connie Zink - Savanna, IL.

will be interesting to see how close they come to that date this year. They were about a week early last year because of the warmer weather. I, for one, am also looking forward to Spring with the arrival of the Sandhill Cranes and hoping for a glimpse of one of their courtship dances. Here's to a great Spring migration and looking forward to seeing some of you on our tours this year!

## Anne's Birding Corner

The Canvasback is a large diving duck with a long sloped forehead and a black bill. The male Canvasback's head and neck are chestnut, back and sides are whitish and the breast is dark. The female has a pale brown head and neck with pale gray-brown back and sides. The Canvasback breeds in central and western Canada south and into the northern states in the middle and western United States. They nest in

prairie potholes, marshes, lakes and bays. It dives for food, which include aquatic plants, tubers, roots, snails, insect larvae and mollusks. It migrates south to winter in the coastal regions and in the southern United States. The species name *Aythya valisineria* comes from the preferred winter food, the Wild Celery or Water Celery, *Vallisneria americana*.



Anne Straight - Forreston, IL

## *Backwater Birding with Bob*



Bob Walton - Zwingle, Ia,

**Do you have a  
birding question??  
Ask Bob! Please  
email Bob at  
[stewardsumrr@gmail.com](mailto:stewardsumrr@gmail.com)  
and your question  
will be answered in  
future issues.**

Winter certainly has been stubborn in refusing to release its icy grip on our backwaters, but if the birdwatchers (and birds) can persevere for a few more weeks, we may be in for a great spring migration. In spite of the brutal artic wind chills and temperatures, massive numbers of waterfowl are slowly moving northward and are now staging near mid-Missouri, waiting for conditions to improve. Spotters have also reported a large buildup of waterfowl in the Quad Cities area, and so with just a handful of days above freezing our early migrators like White-fronted Geese and Tundra Swans should be moving.

A recent trip to Lost Mound revealed that the exposed wing dams along Riverside Road have patches of open water below them, which is a sign

that winter is losing some of its icy grip on our landscape. Bald Eagles were taking advantage of these newly formed “fish feeding stations,” and were clustered in the trees overlooking the open water. We counted over thirty eagles around these small areas of open water. Most of these are migratory eagles that are beginning their journey to nesting territories in Minnesota and Canada. It was interesting to note that all our resident eagles that nest here, have paired up and are already sitting on eggs in the nests. We were also fortunate to see a beautiful Golden Eagle as it soared over the sand prairie of Lost Mound hunting for rabbits.

I encourage everyone to visit their favorite wetland this month to watch as spring finally arrives. It has been a long, long winter and I can't wait to

hear the trumpeting/rattling call of a Sandhill Crane. Here is list of spring harbingers:

March 1-15--Greater White-fronted Geese, Snow Geese, Tundra Swans, and migratory Bald Eagles will peak.

March 15-25--Northern Pintails, American Black Ducks, Gadwalls, American Wigeon, and migrating Mallards will peak.

March 25-3--Early shorebirds will be arriving, and gulls will peak in numbers, particularly at South Sabula Lake. Diving ducks, including Greater Scaup, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Ducks, Canvasbacks, Redheads, and Buffleheads will pass through in large numbers.

### **Which year was the snowiest?**

**As of today's date  
the answer is 1974-  
1975. However 2013  
-2014 is close to  
breaking the all-  
time record for  
snowiest winter.**



### *Jr. Stewards Chatter*

Jr. Stewards are off and running. It was great to be back together again and look forward to another year of fun and discovery. We held a review about the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. It was determined that the refuge will be 90 years old this year. Thank you, Will Dilg, Izaak Walton League and President Coolidge for your efforts in establishing this priceless jewel in 1924. We will be traveling to Neal Smith NWR, Prairie City Iowa on July 12th. There may be possible seats available for Stewards members to travel with us. More information will be available in May.



## *Flash Point - "Look the Other Way"*

When we are out looking for wildlife and birds to photograph, occasionally something completely different will catch my eye. Sure, it is nice to get a great shot of a Bald Eagle or a colorful warbler but there are many things just to the right or left of these subjects that will make an equally impressive photograph.

We stopped along the Mississippi River at Rapids City in Illinois looking for ducks that were migrating in. We saw some beautiful Goldeneye but just beyond where the ducks were happily splashing around in the water was a beautiful icy scene that could have easily been missed. There was a dead tree protruding from the water and with the rising and falling of the water, it created some lovely ice sculptures flowing from the branches.



I always tell you to look around for inspiration. When you have a good subject and you are done getting shots, just turn to your left and then to your right and see what may be there begging to have its picture taken. It could be something as mundane as a single leaf in a mud puddle or as spectacular as a rainbow but you have to see it to photograph it. Keep your mind open when you are out with your camera. You never know what you may find just a little ways away from your subject.

Until next time, turn around and see what is waiting.



Connie Inskeep - Moline, IL.



## *“Operation Canvasback: Canvasbacks and Diesel Fuel Don’t Mix”*

*by Ed Britton*



The waterfowl migration was underway with 50,000 ducks staging just 26 miles north of the fuel spill. Photo by Stan Bousson



Ed Britton is a Wildlife Refuge Manager at the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge .

The fall migration of canvasbacks was underway on the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge on November 25, 2013 when the towboat Stephen L. Colby struck a submerged object and began spilling 91,000 gallons of diesel fuel into the Mississippi River at Le Claire, Iowa. Fifty thousand waterfowl, mostly canvasbacks, were staging for migration just 26 miles north of the fuel spill and 2,000 canvasbacks had moved to within one mile of the spill. It was critical that a massive effort, dubbed Operation Canvasback, be launched immediately to avert a catastrophic disaster that could impact tens of thousands of waterfowl.

Hundreds of bald eagles were also present as they vigilantly followed the migrating waterfowl. And to complicate response actions further, hundreds of local non-migratory Canada geese and mallards frequented the spill area. If any ducks or geese were to get oiled and couldn't fly, eagles would take advantage of the bounty feast and also be impacted.

The crippled towboat had lost power in the navigation channel due to water pouring into its hull. Miraculously, another towboat was close by and pushed the floundering Colby to shore at Le Claire's waterfront. This location was only a few blocks from the Fire Department that deployed booms around the sunken vessel within 50 minutes of the incident, greatly reducing the volume of diesel fuel spilling downriver.



The rainbow sheen of diesel fuel stretched for miles along the Mississippi River shoreline. Photo by United States Coast Guard

Fortunately, the spill did not occur upriver, where an intricate system of backwaters are present within the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

An Incident Command Team led by the U.S. Coast Guard was immediately mobilized. Rock Island Ecological Services contaminants biologist Mike Coffey was the Team's Wildlife Branch Leader. Coffey immediately requested assistance from additional staff at the Ecological Services office, Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, and Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Coast Guard also provided personnel for the Wildlife Branch.

A dramatic response effort was conducted during the next 10 days with over 100 personnel on site daily during the critical response period. The primary tasks were to monitor the movements of migrating and local ducks and geese into the area and be prepared to haze them away to prevent exposure to the diesel fuel while the responders removed the oil from the river and salvaged the 600 ton vessel.

Strong river currents, howling winds, and freezing river conditions challenged the response activities. The spilled fuel turned the Mississippi River surface waters red and a diesel stench saturated the air. The Wildlife Branch conducted daily boat patrols and made plans to capture and rehabilitate oiled wildlife, if necessary. Volunteers with Living Lands and Waters placed colorful streamers along the shoreline to deter wildlife use and assisted with boat patrols. Extensive shoreline searches were conducted in boats, vehicles, and on foot looking for oiled wildlife.

The hard work of the Incident Command Team and Wildlife Branch was rewarded as the migrating canvasbacks took to the sky and avoided the spill area. Two mallards were recovered from within the spill area and both had injuries related to hunting. One Canada goose was found dead by a hunter who reported that it was covered in oil. No fish or mussel mortality was identified. Additional mussel surveys may be conducted in spring.

The towboat sinking occurred in an area known as the Rock Island Rapids where rock formations are prevalent and dynamite had to be used to clear the original 9-foot channel. The NTSB investigation determined that the towboat struck a rock resulting in multiple holes on the underside hull. The amount of diesel fuel that spilled into the river will never be determined. Incredibly, the spill site and adjacent areas were minimally impacted, as best can be determined, due to the quick response actions of the Incident Command Team and the dilution of fuel by the strong river currents along this relative narrow channel area. Operation Canvasback was deemed a grand success and provided closure to one of the largest fuel spills ever experienced on the Upper Mississippi River.



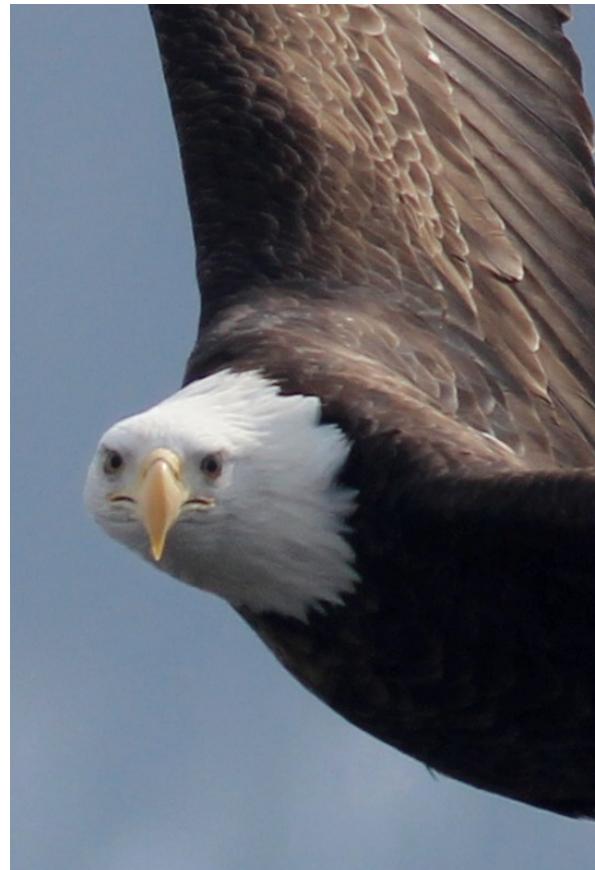
Eric Tomasovic and Russ Engelke conducted boat patrols to locate and haze any waterfowl that wandered into the fuel spill area. Photo by USFWS

## *“Sightings Around the Refuge”*

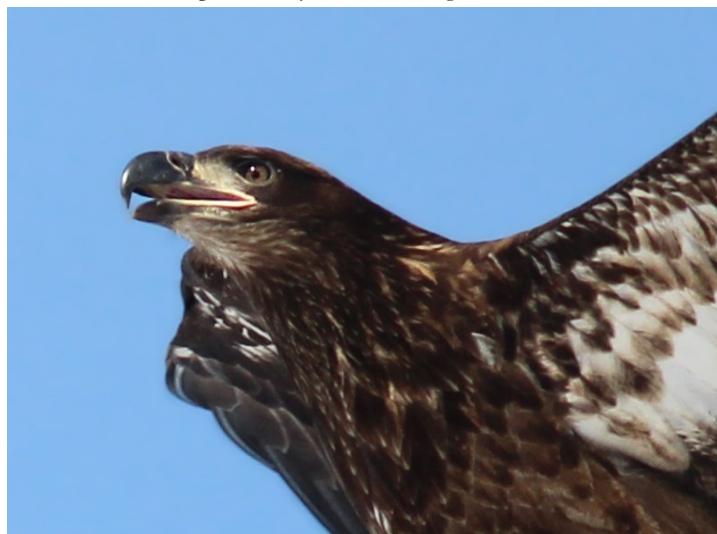


©Michael Fitzgerald

Opossum by Michael Fitzgerald



Bald Eagle by Connie and Wade Inskeep



Juvenile Bald Eagle by Connie and Wade Inskeep



©Larry and Bonnie Thoren 2014

Horned Lark by Larry and Bonnie Thoren



©Larry and Bonnie Thoren 2014

Coyote by Larry and Bonnie Thoren

## *“More Sightings Around the Refuge”*



Ring-necked Pheasant by Larry and Bonnie Thoren



Painted Sunset Over the Refuge by Debbie Cram



Sunset at the Causeway by Debbie Cram



Icy Morning on the bike path by Debbie Cram



American White Pelican by Richard Cox



Great Blue Heron by Richard Cox

## *“Cool Visitors from the North” by Stan Bousson and Michael Fitzgerald*



©Michael Fitzgerald

Snowy Owl by Michael Fitzgerald



Snowy Owl by Stan Bousson

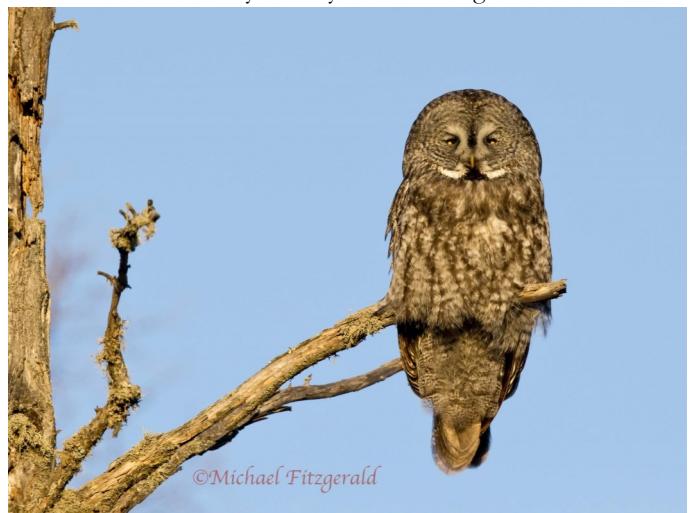


Great Gray Owl by Stan Bousson



©Michael Fitzgerald

Snowy Owl by Michael Fitzgerald



©Michael Fitzgerald

Great Gray Owl by Michael Fitzgerald



Common Goldeneye  
by Michael Fitzgerald



Bald Eagle by Connie and Wade  
Inskeep

## Schedule of Events

Saturday, March 15th "Lost Mound Bald Eagle Viewing Tour" 2:00 pm - 5:00 pm (Meet at Lost Mound Unit Office by 1:45)

Sunday, March 16th "Lost Mound Birding Van Tour" 1:00 pm- 5:00 pm ( Meet at Lost Mound Unit Office by 12:45)

Friday, March 21st Monthly Stewards Potluck Meeting 11:00 am - 1:30 pm

Saturday, March 22nd - "Curing Cabin Fever V"

Saturday, April 12th Sandhill Crane Count (Contact Pam for Info)

Saturday, April 12th "Monthly Bird Walk" 9:00 am - 11:00 am ( Meet at Sloane Marsh)

Saturday April 12th "Lost Mound Birding Van Tour" 2:00 pm- 6:00 pm (Meet at Lost Mound Unit Office by 1:45)

Friday, April 18th Monthly Stewards Potluck Meeting 11:00 am - 1:30 pm

Sunday April 20th "Lost Mound Birding Van Tour" 2:00 pm- 6:00 pm (Meet at Lost Mound Unit Office by 1:45)

Thursday, May 1st "Golf Cart Tour of the Refuge" 8:30 am- 10:30 am

Saturday May 10th "Migratory Bird Day" Details available soon.

Saturday, May 10th "Monthly Bird Walk" 7:30 am - 9:00 am ( Meet at Sloane Marsh)

Saturday May 10th "Lost Mound Birding Van Tour" 2:00 pm- 6:00 pm (Meet at Lost Mound Unit Office by 1:45)

**All events are free and open to the public but registration is required. Please call 815-273-2732 or email stewardsumrr@gmail.com**

**For additional events see our website  
[www.stewardsumrr.org](http://www.stewardsumrr.org)**



### Stewards of the Upper Mississippi River Refuge

815-273-2732

Primary Business Address [stewardsumrr@gmail.com](mailto:stewardsumrr@gmail.com)



Like us on  
**Facebook**

Check out our Website:  
[www.stewardsumrr.org](http://www.stewardsumrr.org)

## Membership Form

All members receive a 10% discount at the Ingerrsoll Wetlands Learning Center Book Store.

Name	Address	City	State	Zip
Phone				
Email:				

### Membership Categories

- |                          |   |         |
|--------------------------|---|---------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Blazing Star ( Student) .....               | \$5     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Yellow-headed Blackbird ( Individual) ..... | \$10    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Ornate Box Turtle (Family) .....            | \$20    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sandhill Crane (Supporter) .....            | \$100   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Osprey ( Corporate) .....                   | \$250   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Bald Eagle ( Lifetime) .....                | \$1,000 |

Mail completed form to SUMRR:

7071 Riverview Rd

Thomson, IL 61285

[www.stewardsumrr.org](http://www.stewardsumrr.org)

Make a difference and  
Join today.



# **Think Spring!**

## **Golf Cart Tours are right around the corner.**

Tours are free and welcome to all ages.

**When:** 1st and 3rd Thursday and the 3rd Saturday on each month from May through October.

**Registration required—limited 7**  
Contact the refuge office at 815-273-2732  
to register or email us:  
[stewardsumrr@gmail.com](mailto:stewardsumrr@gmail.com).

**Where:** Tours will leave promptly at 8 a.m.  
from the Ingersoll Wetlands Learning Center.

