



Trumpeter swans wing their way near Old Cedar Avenue Bridge. Photo by Larry Hollar. Used with permission. Submit your photos and video taken at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge for possible publication to [hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org](mailto:hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org).



## Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends Currents

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### Dear Friends,

As a forty-something parent of a pre-teen and a teenager, talking about today's issues has turned into an absurd game of "never have I ever."

Never have I ever lived during a global pandemic. Never have I lived in an era that is so tumultuous.

But this is the age in which we find ourselves. I have a newfound respect for grandparents who, as parents, lived with the fear and uncertainty of polio during the 1940s. And for parents who, as youths, added their voices to fuel both the civil and women's rights movements during the '60s and '70s.

As I pondered where to begin with this month's letter, I wondered what the poet and avid outdoorsman Walt Whitman would say. A Google search did not disappoint.

"After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, and so on – have found that none of these satisfy, or permanently wear – what remains? Nature remains."

We live in a chaotic society. And while we know nature can be chaotic, we also know the storm will eventually subside. The snow will fall. The sun will rise. The leaves will unfurl. And spring, with its resplendent colors, smells, and sounds, will return.

We hope you continue to find your respite in the Refuge, and wherever nature finds you.

Sara N. Blood  
Executive Director



A group of birders from 2019. Photo/Urban Bird Collective

## **MNVNWR Refuge outreach update**

by Oscar Hernandez  
Latinx Family Liaison/Outreach Specialist

The annual [Christmas Bird Count](#) (CBC) is a longstanding National Audubon Society community science program that takes place in early winter. For the second year, the [Urban Bird Collective](#) partnered with the Refuge by organizing a mentored survey of their designated areas on and off Refuge lands. Their group of 10 (masked and distanced) members recorded every bird they saw and heard throughout the day. They logged 21 bird species on the Black Dog Unit and neighboring areas of Bloomington and Burnsville. The Refuge is grateful for the enthusiasm and mentorship generated by this group of birders!

The Urban Bird Collective is also one of the organizations the Refuge and Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends have partnered with on an urban youth mentoring program that began in 2020.

### **First Nature in Your Neighborhood backpacks distributed**

Eighty Nature in your Neighborhood Backpacks have gone out into the community! Fifty backpacks were distributed to Latino families in Bloomington, and a 30 backpack classroom set was sent to a science classroom at Valley View Elementary School, also in Bloomington.

Inside each backpack are the tools children need to fill out the accompanying activity book, such as a pair of binoculars, a terrarium, a plant press kit, and much more.

Children receiving backpacks are also enrolled in the Nature in Your Neighborhood Club. Each member is invited to bring their backpacks and join Refuge staff on monthly outreach events designed specifically for the Club. Each member also receives a new activity book and tools to correlate with the current season.

## **Refuge happenings**

by Hannah McBrearty  
Park Ranger

Meteorological winter, which started Dec. 1, is half over! The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge is a great place for your favorite winter activities in nearby nature, like [snowshoeing and cross country skiing](#), [fat tire cycling](#), [wildlife tracking](#), [bird watching](#), and more.

### **Snowshoe checkout available beginning Jan. 15**

Adult and youth-size snowshoes will be available for FREE to check out from our Bloomington Visitor Center beginning Jan. 15. While the Visitor Center remains closed, snowshoes will be available on select Fridays and

## Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends January 2021 Currents Newsletter

Saturdays through the winter. Watch the Refuge [Facebook](#) page and [website](#) for more information and available dates. Learn how to snowshoe:

[How to put on snowshoes](#)

[Snowshoeing Basics](#)

### **Teach Outdoors MN partners with wildlife refuges to offer online teacher workshops**

Teaching outdoors is not just for naturalists and field trips, but something every teacher can do. Join U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff and partners from across the state for free professional development workshops on teaching outdoors. Register [here](#).

### **Minnesota River Valley Audubon webinar**

Join author Ken Kaufman Thursday, Jan. 28, at 7:30 p.m. for a virtual presentation on Zoom. Kaufman is a nationally renowned author of field guides and other books such as Kingbird Highway. Ken will join us for an insightful evening presentation. A link will be released closer to the date. Please follow the Refuge's [Facebook](#) page for event information.



Black-capped chickadees are a common sight in the winter months among many a backyard bird feeder in Minnesota. Photo/Creative Commons

## **Wildlife watch: The great backyard bird count**

by Mel Schneider  
Refuge Environmental Educator

Although many of the birds we see in summer have migrated south for the winter, many species tough it out and stick around for the winter. Mid-winter can be a great time to watch birds. With the trees barren of leaves, the snow creating a blank white canvas and the general hush of sounds, it can be much easier to hear and see the birds around us.

What are some of the likely birds you might observe around your neighborhood? Two of the most common and most vocal in the winter months are the black-capped chickadee and the northern cardinal. As daylight increases, listen for their respective songs telling us spring is surely on its way, the short *fee-bee* of the chickadee and *cheer-cheer-cheer* of the northern cardinal. Another bright-colored bird you may see against a snowy backdrop is the blue jay that will gather food from bird feeders and cache it in a safe spot for a later feast.

## Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends January 2021 Currents Newsletter

Woodpeckers are commonly seen in winter, as well, and give themselves away with their loud hammering sounds. Listen and look for red-bellied, downy, hairy, and the large pileated woodpeckers.

Another bird you may see pecking around is the white-breasted nuthatch, which is easy to identify by the unique way they move down a tree head-first. And you may be surprised to see American robins frequenting your yard. Although most robins are migratory, many will overwinter, particularly during milder winters and in areas with plentiful food.

Two of the most common drab-colored birds you might encounter, both of which often feed in flocks, are house finches and house sparrows. The male house finch is easier to identify by the red patch on its head and chest. House sparrows often gather together in bushes or trees, making it come alive with bird sounds. Lastly, a common sight at backyard feeders in winter has migrated from the north and will head back there in the spring: the dark-eyed junco. Juncos tend to be ground feeders and will most often search for seeds that have fallen to the ground.

Are you looking to put all this bird knowledge to use? The Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual citizen-science event hosted by Cornell Lab of Ornithology. It encourages people to participate anywhere you can find birds — the Refuge trails or even your own backyard! The big count takes place Feb. 12-15 and requires only a minimum of 15 minutes of observation to help create a real-time snapshot of bird populations from all around the world!

Visit [here](#) to learn more about how to participate.



Bass Ponds, within the Long Meadow Lake Unit of the MVNWR, has seen some improvements, including a new footbridge, fishing pier, and water sampling dock. Photo/USFWS

### **Bass Ponds gets a facelift**

by Joel Vos  
Ranger and Visitor Center Manager

Bass Ponds, a popular walking, fishing, and birding site within the Long Meadow Lake Unit of the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, has recently seen a facelift! After multiple flood events over the years, existing fishing piers, water sampling docks, and the footbridge over Ike's Creek had fallen into disrepair. This fall, crews worked to install new bridges and piers to improve public access.

Due to safety concerns, a sturdy steel bridge replaced the wooden footbridge across Ike's Creek. The new bridge allows visitors to complete the loop around the historic Bass Ponds and for fish and other wildlife to pass safely underneath.

In addition, the old fishing pier was replaced. The new floating pier improves accessibility for all users and provides increased space for students who participate in the Refuge's partner school fishing programs. The pier

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends  
January 2021 Currents Newsletter

was also installed farther into the pond to increase the fishable space for students and visitors who try their hand at catching bass, bluegills, and other fish found there.

Students will also benefit from a new water sampling dock, installed to provide improved, safer access to the marsh. With an increase in useable space, both the fishing pier and sampling dock can now accommodate full classes, including those with mobility impairments.

The selection of materials, decisions on size and location were a collaboration between the Refuge's environmental education, biology, maintenance, and management teams. The Refuge is very excited to welcome the public to use these improved resources to enjoy the Refuge and for these spaces to be filled with the excited and intrigued voices of students, staff, and visitors!

Bass Ponds area trailhead can be found at 2501 86th Street East in Bloomington. All outdoor spaces at the Refuge, including trails and grounds, are open to the public seven days a week from sunrise to sunset.

**Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends**

**Engaging People with Nature.**

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