



Local artist Sophia Crosby delivered a brand new three-piece mural for the Bloomington Education and Visitor Center. A project that began in November 2019, the mural features various Minnesota wildlife in their natural habitat as the environment seamlessly transitions from fall to winter. Submit your photos and video taken at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge for possible publication to [hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org](mailto:hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org).

**Photo/USFWS.**



## Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends Currents

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**Dear Friends,**

One of my brother's lifelong friends is Saint, a bear of a guy who works for the railroad in northern Minnesota.

I ran into him one late summer day a few years ago. I asked him what he planned to do while he was in the Cities.

"Well, you know, winter is coming, so I thought I'd work on my winter weight at the state fair."

We all have our rituals for preparing for winter. I'm THRILLED if the winter gear hanging on our back door is cleared out by June and not seen again until November. Bring on the baseball gear!

With a 12-year-old boy at home, my winter ritual begins by determining what outdoor items still fit, what hand me downs now work, and what needs to be replaced.

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But I have a confession to make. I hate February. During the month of valentines and sweetness, old man winter's grip gets a little too desperate. Only in the last four years has remote working made it feasible for me to escape to warmer climes. COVID, however, has thwarted all visions of palm fronds and sand between my toes.

The *Star Tribune* has come up with a plan to help us over the hump with the “[Embrace Winter Challenge](#).” Can you spare 30 minutes these next 30 days to spend time outside? Never mind the Polar Vortex. Perhaps February is when we should begin our New Year’s resolutions to reduce stress and improve our immune system by embracing our colder climes.

And for those who already enjoy winter, consider a 1,000-hour challenge. [This online resource](#) was created by a family that wanted to spend less time in front of screens and more time outdoors. We already count calories, steps, and stars to our next free cup of coffee. Why not track the time we spend outside as well?

If you do hop on the effort to embrace winter, we hope you’ll consider spending some of that time at MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Read on to find out more about free contactless snowshoe events, or check out the prairie and oak savanna habitats at Rapids Lake. Consider these and the [11 other ways our National Wildlife Refuges make our lives better](#).

We hope to see you embracing winter soon at the Refuge!

Sara N. Blood  
Executive Director

## MN Valley Refuge Friends annual report

The Oct. 2019-Sept. 2020 Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends annual report is now available. [Click here](#) to learn more about how your donations, volunteering, and community partners supported our Refuge in the past fiscal year. Thank you for all you do for the Refuge!



Tagged monarch butterfly in Minnesota. **Photo by Katie Steiger-Meister/USFWS.**

## MN Valley Refuge Friends member event March 11, 7 p.m.: Monarch hour with the USFWS

Interested in learning more about monarch butterflies? Come to Monarch Hour with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), a Facebook Live event on Thursday, March 11, from 7-8 p.m. Featured speakers for this

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one-hour presentation are AnnMarie Krmpotich, National Coordinator-Pollinator Conservation, Science Applications, and Lori Nordstrom, Ecological Services Assistant Regional Director.

Come learn about monarch butterfly biology, the recent Endangered Species Act listing decision, and how the USFWS is working to conserve this species. Plus, learn how you and urban refuges like the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge play a crucial role in protecting pollinators.

Register for this event on Facebook [here](#). For those who don't have Facebook, we'll provide a recorded video link in our April newsletter.

This event is made possible thanks to financial contributions from members like you. Thank you!

### Refuge happenings

by Oscar Hernandez, Latinx Family Liaison/Outreach Specialist  
& Hanna McBrearty, Park Ranger



#### What a catch!

The new cohort of students in the SEAK (Students Eagerly Acquiring Knowledge) program attended their first in-person event hosted by Minnesota Trout Unlimited. While enjoying an afternoon of introductory ice fishing on Lake McCarrons, students learned about ice safety and explored the importance of water quality of water quality with a secchi disk, a tool used to gauge the transparency of water. SEAK youth are already gearing up for their next in-person event, a snowshoe program in February! **Photo/USFWS**.

#### Contactless snowshoeing continues in February



Last month, the MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Services and Outreach team hosted the first of several contact-free snowshoeing programs in the community. These pop-up programs are promoted through hand-picked partners and will continue through the month of February. [Click here to check out our upcoming snowshoe events and more.](#)

Adult and youth-size snowshoes are also available from the [Rapids Lake Education and Visitor Center in Carver](#) on Sundays, from 1-4 p.m., weather conditions permitting. Pre-registration is required and can be done at [this link](#). **Photo/USFWS**.

## Refuge birding events

### Backyard bird feeder count Feb. 12-15

Looking for something sweet to do this Valentine's Day? Participate in the [Backyard Bird Count](#) over the holiday weekend by observing the birds in your own yard for just 15 minutes! Your data helps scientists better understand the birds of North America and it can help you identify your feathered neighbors.

Don't forget to record your findings at [birdcount.org](#)!

### Audubon webinar: Owls of the Eastern Ice

On Thursday, Feb. 25, at 7:30 p.m., join Dr. Jonathan Slaght, author of "Owls of the Eastern Ice," *The Times'* (U.K.) Nature Book of the Year 2020, for a presentation about an adventure into the Siberian winter to find, study, and hopefully save the world's most elusive owl. A Zoom link will be sent out in an email prior to the meeting date. Visit the Minnesota River Valley Audubon Chapter [website](#) to learn more or to sign up for the newsletter to receive the Zoom link via email.

### Junior duck stamp art contest

Let's explore the world of waterfowl! Join one of Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge's environmental educators for an interactive virtual presentation on Sunday, Feb. 21, at 2 p.m. to discover the adaptations that make waterfowl unique and suited for life in the wetlands. Through discussion, demonstrations, an interactive game, and a guided learn-to-draw activity, we'll learn all about the waterfowl that call Minnesota home. You'll also learn about the [Junior Duck Stamp Art Contest](#) and how you can enter your own waterfowl artwork!

This virtual event is tailored for families and kids in second through fifth grades, but "kids" of all ages are welcome to join! Registration is free but required and limited to 50 people. [Register on Eventbrite](#).

### Get to know your Refuge: North Hunter Lot Trail

Take a winter wander through the prairie and oak savanna habitats in the Carver Bluffs area of the Minnesota River Valley. The trail is a one-mile path from the parking lot on CR11 (Jonathan Carver Pkwy) to the northeast and returning on a loop back to the parking lot. For extra adventure, take a steep spur trail to Rapids Lake, the unit's namesake. View dormant grasses and wildflower seed heads, enjoy winter birds like bald eagles and great horned owls, and listen for the drumming of woodpeckers in the oak savanna. This trail is periodically groomed with corduroy single track for hiking, cycling and cross-country skiing. Go: [Jonathan Carver Parkway North Hunter Lot, 14905 Jonathan Carver Parkway/CR 11, Carver, MN 55315](#)



A nesting pair of eagles. Photo/Kenneth Cole Schneider/Creative Commons.

## Wildlife watch: Building an eagle aerie

by Mel Schneider  
Refuge Environmental Educator

One of the most iconic birds you may see along the Minnesota River is the bald eagle. For a nearly extinct bird in the early 1960s, they are now so ubiquitous they are common in the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. In 2017, it's estimated that Minnesota was home to approximately 9,800 pairs of bald eagles!

February is a great time to spot eagles at the Refuge. Trees are still bare, making bird watching easier. Eagles have begun breeding and can be seen in pairs courting, building nests, and laying eggs.

I recently saw an eagle pair perched near the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. They were quite loud about it, a breeding season behavior that makes them easier to spot. Eagles begin mating at four or five years old — a full white head and tail are signs of sexual maturity.

Pairs generally mate for life and tend to use the same nest year after year, especially after producing a successful brood. Every year around January, they will work together to rebuild and strengthen the nest. Eagle nests can range from four to eight feet in diameter — as large as a king-sized bed — and weigh up to one ton! It takes one to three months to build a nest this large, and some eagles might build a second back-up nest in the same territory.

Nesting is part of the courtship and pair-bonding process, as are swooping and cartwheeling aerial displays, perching, calling, and preening. The breeding and egg-laying process itself occurs mid- or late-February through March, depending on weather and location.

If you want to spot an eagle nest, look high up in the tallest mature trees near lakes or rivers, especially cottonwoods — one of the largest and sturdiest species near water — aspen, oak, pine, or fir trees. Bottomland

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hardwood forests and densely forested valleys protected from wind are prime nesting habitats. Always observe quietly from a longer distance, as the courting, nesting, and breeding periods are when eagles are most sensitive to human disturbances and may abandon a nest for the entire breeding season.

Have you recently spotted a nest on Refuge land? Help us update our eagle database! Send your observations to [minnesotavalley@fws.gov](mailto:minnesotavalley@fws.gov) and include time and date; location of the nest; if birds are on/near nest; the number of birds observed; and if birds are actively nest building. If you want to watch some eagle nesting action from your own home, check out the live [USFWS Eagle Cam](#) located at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia.

### **Support your local urban refuge by donating today**

Government funding does not cover all that is necessary to manage Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. According to the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the National Wildlife Refuge System encompasses more than 850 million acres of lands and waters across 568 National Wildlife Refuges and Marine National Monuments. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service receives 59 cents per acre to maintain lands and waters and meet the needs of its more than 59 million annual visitors (pre-pandemic figures). In comparison, the National Park Service receives \$31 per acre for land management.

In this recent article in Audubon Magazine, writers Leah Sottile and Andy McGlashen examine how refuges are needed by birds and loved by people. Still, without money, they can't service the wildlife or people like they're supposed to. Read, "[Overwhelmed and Understaffed, Our National Wildlife Refuges Need Help.](#)"

Sign up to receive this newsletter: <https://www.mnvalleyrefugefriends.org/newsletter.html>

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends  
At the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge  
3815 American Blvd E  
Bloomington MN 55425  
952-858-0737  
[hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org](mailto:hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org)

### **Engaging People with Nature.**

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

Contributions are tax-deductible.

Thank you for your support!