



& Visitor Center. Submit your photos and videos taken at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge for possible publication to hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org.

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends Currents

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Q & A with MN Valley NWR Manager Sarena Selbo

Editor's Note: We are forgoing this month's executive director's letter to ask Refuge Manager Sarena Selbo some commonly asked questions about the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge during COVID-19.



What's currently open at the Refuge?

Since the Minnesota Stay-at-Home order, the trails at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge that are not flooded remain open sunrise to sunset.

As the governor has encouraged Minnesotans to spend time outside, is the Refuge also seeing an increase in visitors?

Absolutely. We have seen a fivefold increase in visitors at the Refuge over the past two months. We hope that people are enjoying the Refuge whether they are a first-time or frequent visitor.

What should visitors know about the Refuge, especially now?

In addition to units being open from sunrise to sunset, we ask visitors who drive here and find a parking lot full to consider trying a different unit or to come back at a different time. If feasible, they can consider biking or utilizing public transport when restrictions on essential travel are relaxed. When visitors arrive, please practice social distancing; pack in, pack out (dispose of waste properly); and keep dogs on leash. While leashes are always required, it is especially important now to prevent wildlife from being flushed off nests.

The Refuge does not charge admission and parking is always free. Bathrooms and visitor centers remain closed for the time being.

How is the Refuge staff?

All of our employees are healthy at this time. While we are largely adhering to the governor's stay at home order, we are still working hard from home to provide valuable virtual outreach, distance learning curriculum and more! We also have a limited number of employees onsite to maintain the security and safety of your Refuge. For example, our federal wildlife officer is still patrolling to keep both people and natural resources safe.

MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge is also a destination for many interns.

Yes! We currently have four environment educational interns who are teleworking to finish out the school year. But we will be limited in how many interns we can bring on this summer and fall due to COVID-19. It's a fine balance between safety and providing a rewarding, mentored experience.

When will the visitor centers be open?

A specific date has not yet been determined. Right now, we're following both local and federal guidelines to determine when it's safe to re-open.

How will the visitor centers operate when they do open?

The safety and security of our visitors, volunteers and employees is our number one concern. Governor Tim Walz has described the reopening of our state like the turning of a dial and that describes how we will operate as well: slowly and carefully. We are considering options, such as limiting the number of visitors and may not have big events for some time even after we do re-open. And we are considering a phased approach, such as limiting the staff we have return initially until we have protective measures in place, such as providing additional hand sanitizer and ample cleaning supplies.

Every Refuge depends on its volunteers. How will you be working with yours?

We may have some volunteers return more quickly than others. It all depends on how closely they have to work together. For example, we may be able to do some habitat work outside with the fresh air and social distancing before having them do work indoors and in close quarters like welcoming our visitors at the information desk.

How can people keep updated on COVID-19 plans at the Refuge?

We provide all our updates, including trail conditions on our Refuge's home page: https://www.fws.gov/refuge/minnesota_valley/. We are also sharing updates on the Refuge's [Facebook page](#). Staff will also continue to provide volunteers with updates as more information becomes available.

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends will also work closely with Refuge staff to share updates on its website, Facebook page, the Currents newsletter and through email.



Refuge Volunteer Andy Grewell, Board of directors.

Meet a refuge volunteer: Andy Grewell

How did you first learn about the Refuge?

I first learned about the Refuge by passing by - overhead looking down during a flight or driving across the bridges and looking at the birds, rivers, and woods below. I also stumbled across its biking paths at one point or another. I also remember attending a training at a Bloomington hotel many years ago and a group of us went for walk during a break through part of the Refuge.

What made you decide to continue serving on the board?

I love the activities we are doing to introduce youth to the Refuge through experiential learning. We all need to be better at giving kids, regardless of their family or financial situations, opportunities to explore outside and realize the importance of getting outdoors to learn. I think it's a necessary counterbalance to screen time and indoor play.

Aside from serving on the board, how else do you like to volunteer at the Refuge?

I jump in from time to time on other projects and events, but right now most of my Refuge time is spent on the Board and spreading the word about getting out there!

What question do people most commonly ask you about the Refuge?

Usually, I get "What is it?" to which I normally answer, "You have to go explore it for yourself!" followed by some facts, history and links. People get it pretty quickly and are usually surprised at the Refuge's size.

What is your favorite thing to do at the Refuge?

Hikes through the woods, and most recently snowshoeing! Sometimes while I'm driving between work and home, I will make a detour, stop at the Bloomington Visitor Center and grab a quick 45-minute solo trek through the Long Meadow Lake Unit. Don't tell my kids though.

Outside of the Refuge, what is another favorite outdoor spot for you?

I've got so many, but I've been going to the [Boundary Waters](#) since I was a kid and I still try to get up there every couple of years. The memories of the obstacles, teamwork, relaxation, and wilderness I've found there are precious to me.

Survey says: Help a grad student, support the Refuge

My name is Linnea Eiben, and I'm a graduate student for the University of Minnesota in natural resource management. I've also worked with Minnesota Valley in the past. For my master's project, I am developing a set of signs for Minnesota Valley's new nature play area at Old Cedar Avenue. These signs are catered to nature play area visitors, specifically adults and children, and suggest ways to engage with different stations while explaining the purpose of a nature play area.

As part of the development process, I created a survey to gather opinions on the signs from people connected to the Refuge. The survey will randomly show you 3 of the 6 total signs that correspond with a nature play area station and ask you to rate and comment on them. Your honest thoughts are very important as I will use them to improve the language and visuals, making sure the signs as effective as possible before they are installed.

The survey will only take 5-10 minutes to complete, and you will be supporting visitor experience on the refuge as well as a graduate student's educational endeavors. Thank you so much for your input and time! Link to survey: https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_00tGguMEqP5A0JL

Wildlife watch: May brings the arrival of wildlife newborns

by Refuge Education Practicum Melissa Schneider

May, to many, is a particularly beautiful month: wildflowers add color to the forest floor, trees burst with vibrant green leaves and strikingly bright flowers, and the air is redolent with the sweet smell of lilacs. But May also happens to be the cutest month. If, like many of us, you need a little dose of sweetness these days, a good place to look for it is in your nearest nature area where newborn animals are starting to arrive in the world. On May 4 I saw a brood of ducklings tripping through the reeds in a nearby pond and a line of goslings following their parents across the trail. I've seen a bald eagle nesting across from the Old Cedar boardwalk, and a robin sitting vigilantly on a nest only two feet above my head. One of my favorite moments though was a tiny painted turtle, no larger than a quarter and still covered in dirt, making its way along the forest floor toward its first swim. You may wonder that it is a bit early for turtles to be nesting, and you are right, but when eggs hatch late in the year those turtles often stay nested through fall and winter, not emerging until the next spring! When our feet are slow and quiet, and our eyes are open wide, we may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of these tiny new animals discovering their world for the first time.

MN Valley NWR welcomes new visitor services manager



Kara Zwickey is joining the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District as its new visitor services manager. With over 13 years of experience working in the National Wildlife Refuge System, Kara's career has taken her to Necedah, Rice Lake, Neal Smith, Upper Mississippi River and, most recently, the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge in Homer, Alaska. Kara is excited to be returning to the Midwest and to work at an urban refuge where she can bring her passion and expertise in connecting with the local community, fostering meaningful experiences in nature, and mentoring the next generation of conservation leaders.

Intern Jazmyn Bernard continues on with Wildlife Refuge System



Environmental Education intern Jazmyn Bernard has accepted a seasonal position at [Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Texas. Jazmyn is eager to continue pursuing a career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and credits her experience at Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge as being a significant stepping stone to entering the field:

"I went through four years of college before figuring out what type of career I might want to do in the future. I tried multiple types of field research jobs, but I never connected to anything that I did. However, with the help of one professor, I found a career option that would connect me to what I am most passionate about; environmental education! With my goals set high, I began to look for internships in environmental education. However, I soon faced the challenge of finding an internship that would take someone without many experiences in education. Then through a lot of job searching, I found my current internship with the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge as an environmental educator. This internship didn't require many years of experience; they were searching for someone willing to work hard and learn how to be a great educator. And through this well-organized program, I have been molded into a great educator. My supervisors during this program made it their priority to help me grow by giving me multiple skill-building trainings, constructive reviews, and a lot of positive support. And now as my position at Minnesota Valley NWR comes to an end I have the confidence to continue my work in environmental education. For the summer of 2020, I plan to work at a new refuge to be their environmental educator. And I know that what I learned and the connections I made at the Minnesota Valley NWR will help me during my next adventure!"

Paid stipends for Bernard and other interns roles this school year were paid for with support from Minnesota Valley Trust and the Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends. If you are interested in learning

how your dollars can support future interns like Jazmyn, please contact us at hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org.

What's new at the Nature Store

Located at the Bloomington Education & Visitor, the Blufftop Nature Store remains closed until further notice. **The bookstore is a significant funding source of Refuge Environmental Education activities and programs.** We know the coronavirus has impacted you in many ways. If you can, [please consider joining or renewing your membership with Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends for \\$25](#). If we all pitch in a little, we can make a big difference in supporting the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge as a thriving urban refuge where nature connects people, communities and wildlife.

Thank you.

Sketching in nature: What's new on YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_o_tSr4I30&t=8s

While in-person events at Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge are currently on hold to ensure the safety of visitors, staff and volunteers, refuge staff are turning to technology to continue to provide programs. A two-part Sketching in Nature course is now available on the Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends YouTube channel! You can still learn all the techniques that would have been covered in the class and follow along with environmental educator Eliza to practice your own nature sketch.

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