



Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends Annual Report 2019-2020



Public art at the Bloomington Education and Visitor Center in 2019. Photo/MVRF

A Letter from Our President

Dear Friends,

One of the pleasures of producing an annual report is the opportunity to take stock in what has been accomplished to support the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

Here are just some of the highlights from Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends for 2019-20.

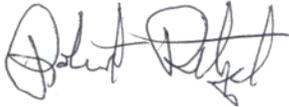
Because of generous support from members like you, as well as funders that include the Minnesota Valley Trust, Cargill, and the Bosch Community Fund, Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends has been able to:

- Transport thousands of students from nearby schools during the 2019-2020 school year to and from the Refuge with the Blue Goose Bus Fund. Schools where at least half of the student population receives free or reduced-cost lunches qualify for free transportation.
- Provide countless volunteer hours to staff the front desks at the Refuge visitor centers, operate the Blufftop Nature Store, assist in environmental education learning, and support events both at the Refuge and throughout the community, including the Minneapolis Monarch Festival and Minnesota Bat Festival.
- During the pandemic, we've supported the Refuge staff in its efforts to pivot to virtual events and establish the [Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends YouTube channel](#), now home to a treasure trove of online environmental education resources developed by Refuge staff.
- Provide support for five interns at the Refuge in community outreach, conservation, and environmental education, giving them opportunities to grow and develop as conservation leaders.
- Conduct habitat-related projects on the Refuge, including goat grazing to remove invasive species at the Bloomington Education and Visitor Center and chloride testing in Ike's Creek, a restored brook trout stream steps away from the Mall of America.
- Secure a partnership with Bloomington theater and visual arts nonprofit organization *Artistry* to rethink the Refuge's gallery space and its use.
- Create a new mentoring program for urban youth to learn an outdoor activity both on and off the Refuge. We worked with Refuge staff to establish a birding program with the nonprofit organization *Urban Bird Collective*.
- Continue funding the position of our organization's first-ever staff member and part-time Executive Director Sara Blood. She has modernized our organization's operations and placed us on firmer footing both financially and culturally.

No National Wildlife Refuge "gets by" without a little help from its Friends—there are now 218 Refuge Friends organizations throughout the country. Through these and many other activities, YOU are helping the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge secure its rightful place as one of the country's premier urban refuges. Thank you! With time and your continued support, we hope we can also say one day that the Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends is one of the nation's premier Refuge Friends groups.

But the year ahead is not without its challenges. During the pandemic, our Blufftop Nature Store at the Bloomington Education & Visitor Center – a primary funding source for Refuge Friends’ activities – has and will remain closed for the foreseeable future. Our efforts to re-engage in in-person activities with members like you both on and off the Refuge have also been postponed. During this time, our staff and Board of Directors will continue to forge ahead on behalf of the Refuge, thanks to the firm foundation of support that you as donors and volunteers have provided to us.

Thank you,



Robert “Randy” Petzel, M.D.
President, Board of Directors

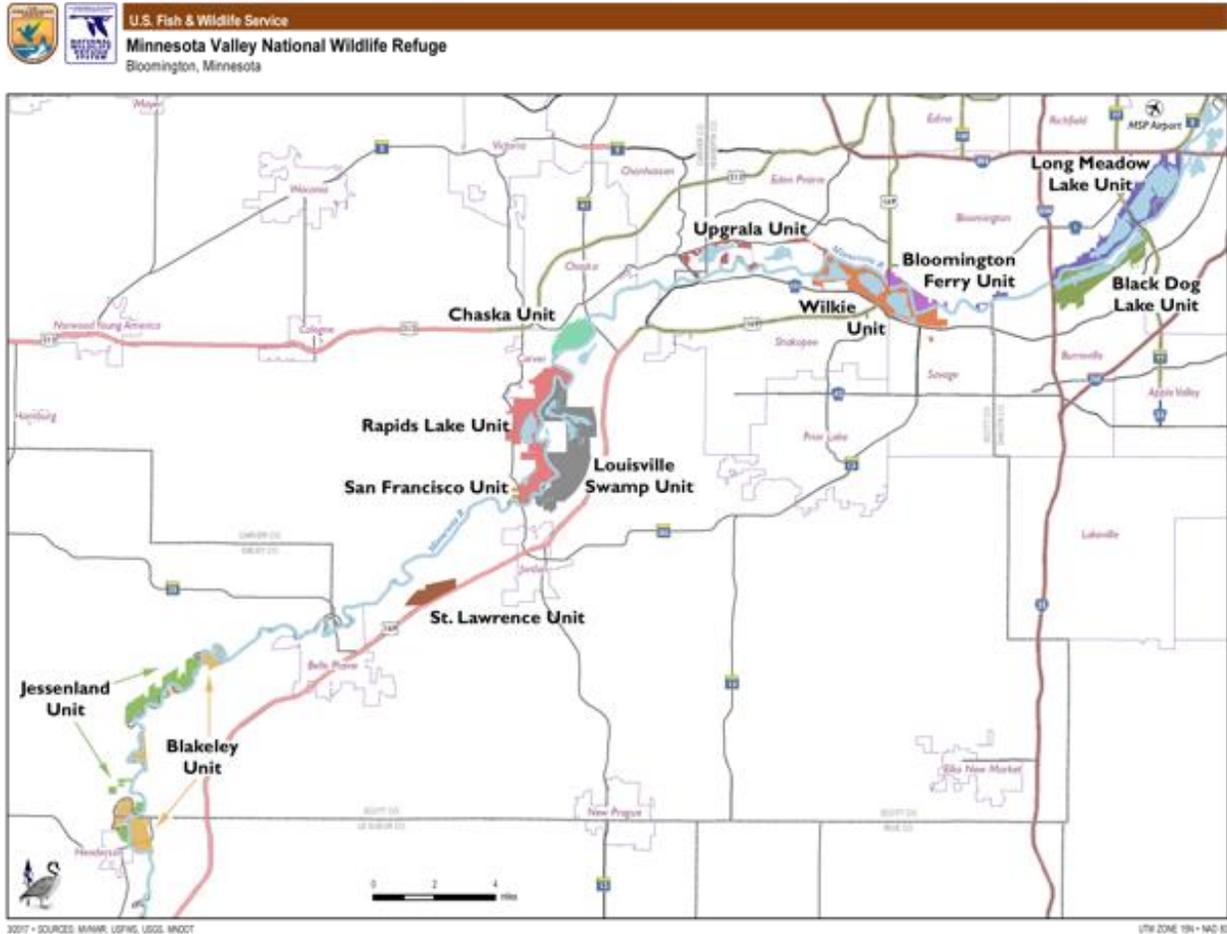


Our Mission

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends assists the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife in its mission to “work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance the fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends

Board of Directors	Members at Large	Bookkeeping
President Randy Petzel	Mercedes Akinseye	Nancy Haugdahl
Vice President Dave Guzzi	Shannon Breimhurst	Bookstore Manager
Secretary Pat Graham	Andy Grewell	Richard Sanford
Treasurer Barb Corriveau	Richard Sanford	Refuge Friends Staff
	Steve Sutter, founder	Interim Executive Director Sara N. Blood

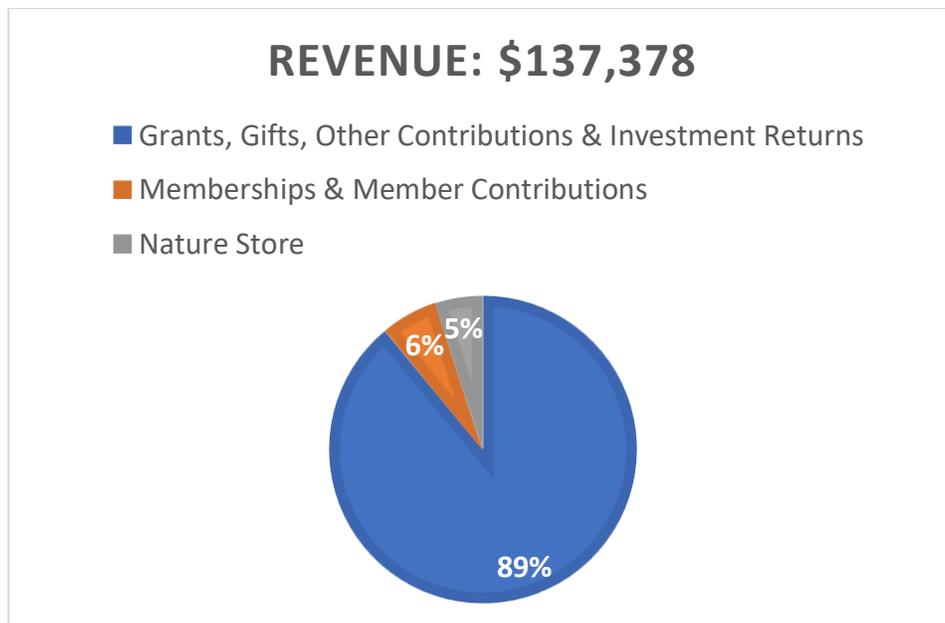
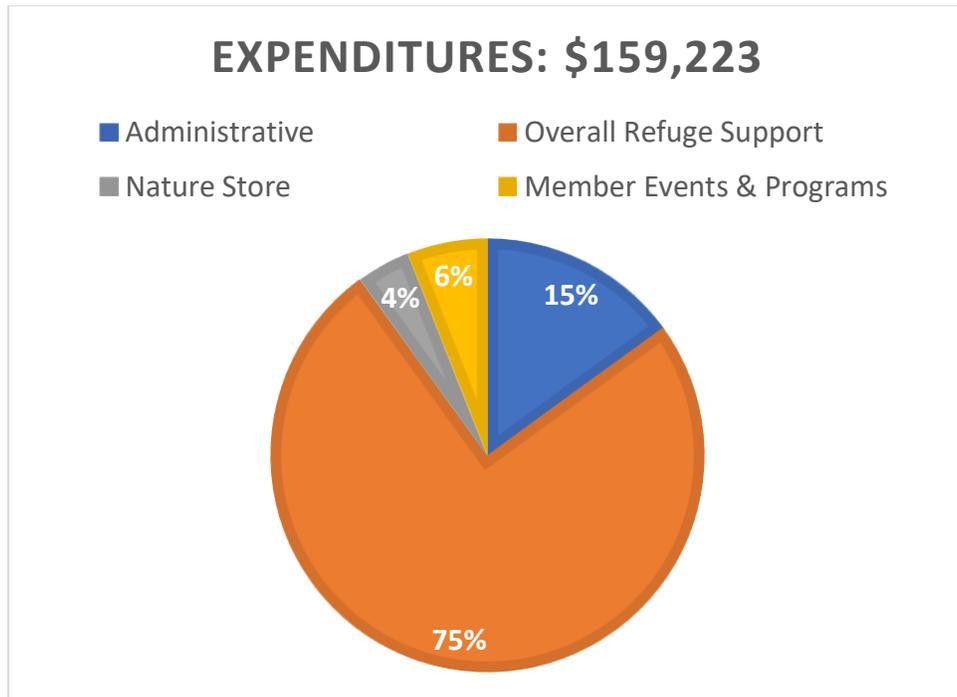


About the MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge

The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge is a part of a corridor of land stretching nearly 70 miles along the Minnesota River, from Bloomington to Henderson, Minnesota. Comprising more than 17,000 acres, the Refuge has 12 units, offering a variety of free outdoor recreational experiences for individuals and families. The Refuge also manages a 14-county Wetland Management District.

The Refuge is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). These public lands and waters are set aside to conserve America's wild animals, insects and plants. The USFWS is supported at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge by the nonprofit organization Minnesota Valley Trust, which works with landowners who wish to sell or donate their land to expand the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends, a mostly volunteer nonprofit organization, also supports the Refuge by managing the Nature Store at the Bloomington Education and Visitor Center; recruiting volunteers for information desks as well as Refuge activities and events; fundraising to support environmental education, habitat restoration, urban outreach, mentoring, arts and other Refuge programs; promoting Refuge programs and advocating for local environmental issues; and creating opportunities for the public to engage with nature.

2019-2020 MVRF Revenues & Expenditures



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 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.

As a result, wildlife refuges depend on "Friends" groups such as the Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends (MVRF) to fill in the gaps, providing financial and volunteer support. In 2019-2020, total philanthropic support and other income sources to MVRF were **\$137,378**. For half of the fiscal year, one of the primary funding sources — the Nature Store at the Bloomington Education & Visitor Center — was closed due to the pandemic.

While many programs and services were reduced due to COVID-19, **75%** of the budget went directly to helping the Refuge in the areas of environmental education, conservation, wildlife protection, and research. Refuge support includes items such as displays, exhibits, student busing, equipment, interpretive signage, intern stipends, and research.



Ike's Creek/USFWS

Water Quality at Ike's Creek



For more than 10 years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has been working with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Trout Unlimited to restore a rare urban trout stream located in the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and just steps away from the front door of the Mall of America. The creek is less than one mile long but clean and cold enough to restore native brook trout in 2007, which once thrived in the area, but disappeared between the 1950s and 1970s. This body of water, known unofficially as Ike's Creek, is named in tribute to the area's 90-year-plus history with the Izaak Walton League. In 1927, the league began construction of spring-fed fish rearing ponds, which were used to restock local lakes for the next 30 years. Fishing on Ike's Creek is currently prohibited.

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The Refuge wants to protect and preserve Ike's Creek as a restored urban trout stream. There has been a lot of recent development around the creek, which may introduce new point sources for chloride as well as erosion due to the dumping of snow.

In 2020, Cargill Salt provided Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends with a \$10,000 grant to study chloride's impact on Ike's Creek. Beginning in January 2021, the grant will be used to contract with the Metropolitan Council via the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District to conduct weekly snowmelt chloride and conductivity testing. (Conductivity measures water's ability to conduct electricity due to the presence or absence of sodium, magnesium, calcium, chloride, and other ions.) Calcium, magnesium, hardness, sulfate, alkalinity and temperature will also be measured to better understand the water chemistry. This will provide the USFWS with more consistent chloride data during the winter months that, up until this point, has been limited to occasional grab samples.



**Artist Emily Donovan was the last artist featured at the Bloomington Education and Visitor Center before the visitor center closed due to COVID-19 in March 2020.
Photos/USFWS**

Art Gallery

A gallery space at the Bloomington Visitor and Education Center long has hosted displays by local artists. Occasionally, artists have also lent their talents to teach visitors about the various interplays between nature and art. A fantastic exhibition featuring Minneapolis artist Emily Donovan, which included a demonstration on creating handmade dyes from natural materials, inspired the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends (MVRF) to dream bigger on how the gallery space could be utilized. In spring of 2020, MVRF secured \$10,000 from an anonymous donor to contract with a curator to revitalize the use of the gallery space. In July, an agreement was signed with Bloomington nonprofit arts organization Artistry to begin work on 11 goals, including a renaming and rebranding of the gallery space, and to make exhibitions more representative of the diverse talent in our community. Look for exciting things to come to this space in 2021!

Mentoring



With a grant from the Bosch Community Fund, Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends (MVRF) worked with Refuge staff to develop a new small-group mentoring program to introduce youth from under-resourced communities to birding, hiking, photography, fishing, and, of course, get them to the Refuge!

Urban Bird Collective is the first partner signed to lead a youth mentoring group, which specializes in birding activities for Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and

the LGBTQ community.

MVRF is thrilled to be working with the Urban Bird Collective to introduce area youth to the great outdoors and to start a lifelong passion for birding and the Refuge.



Volunteers staff the Nature Store and Information Desk at the Bloomington Education & Visitor Center. Photo from 2019. Knit hats are some of the popular items available at the Nature Store. Photo/MVRF

Nature Store

The Blufftop Nature Store at the Bloomington Education and Visitor Center is an important funding source for Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends. All profits directly benefit Refuge programs and services.

The Nature Store carries educational items for all ages, from puppets and puzzles to books and brochures and guides on native species. Most items focus on native and migratory wildlife, and some are made by local artists. MVRF members receive a 10% discount on select purchases.

The store has been closed to the public since March 2020 due to COVID-19. When it is open, the Nature Store operates seven days a week, thanks to the hard work of volunteers who operate the Nature Store. We look forward to the day when it is safe to reopen in 2021!

Environmental Education



In a typical year, Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends pays for the transportation of 10,000 school children to visit the Refuge, many of whom come from under-resourced communities and have never experienced a wildlife refuge. The 2019-2020 school year was no different until COVID-19 put a halt on field trips in March 2020.

The Blue Goose Bus Fund provides free transportation to the Refuge for schools where at least half the student population receives free or reduced-cost lunches. This is possible with generous support from our members, donors and the Minnesota Valley Trust. **Photo, left:**

Students on a 2019 field trip to the Rapids Lake Education & Visitor Center. Photo/MVRF



The 2019-2020 MVNWR Environmental Education intern team, from left: Melissa Schneider, Eliza Foli, Jazmyn Bernard and Laura Gould. Photos/Provided

Intern program

Every year, Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends supports the Refuge's internship program to augment its Environmental Education staff. The 2019-2020 interns received an immersive teaching experience, leading groups through experiential learning exercises and managing students in the classroom and outdoors while utilizing Refuge curriculum. Teaching occurred both in-person and virtually. The interns had many opportunities for professional development to learn about careers in environmental education, connecting people to the outdoors and working with various cultures in the Twin Cities. Intern stipends, including training and gear, are made possible thanks to generous donations from the Minnesota Valley Trust and the Jack M. Lynch Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge Fund.

New at MVRF



Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends (MVRF) welcomed its first-ever executive director and part-time employee **Sara N. Blood** in April 2019. Sara served as part-time interim executive director until she was named the permanent executive director in September 2020. A public relations veteran for over 20 years, Sara has worked with some of the most well-known agencies in the Twin Cities and is an independent nonprofit consultant. Folks familiar with the Refuge may recognize her from 2015 when she was tapped to lead a multi-prong marketing campaign and celebration for the Refuge's 40th anniversary. Since joining MVRF, Sara has been tasked with modernizing our organization from the top down, beginning with updating our member outreach (her letter in our monthly *Currents* newsletter is not to be missed!), fundraising, organizational governance and accounting practices. A premier urban refuge deserves a premier Friends group, and Sara is central in helping to make that a reality. Sara's position is made possible with generous contributions from members like you as well as the Minnesota Valley Trust and a funder who wishes to remain anonymous. Please give Sara a warm hello next time you see her at the Refuge!

Member perks & events

Members play a vital role in helping Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends succeed in its mission to help and advocate for the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. With your help, we are able to connect children and families from under-resourced communities with the local wonders of nature, conduct habitat enhancement activities, support the development of future conservation professionals and more.

Your membership to Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends includes 10% off select merchandise at the Blufftop Nature Store at the Bloomington Education and Visitor Center as well as a subscription to *Currents*, our monthly member newsletter.

During the 2019-2020 fiscal year, it was our mission to resume events and training opportunities for members and their families. We held a snowshoe outing with LL Bean in late February before events and activities were abruptly brought to a halt due to COVID-19.

Look for exciting new virtual activities to begin in 2021.



The city of Bloomington declared Oct. 8, 2019, Steve Sutter Day. Pictured from left at the Bloomington City Council Chambers, Robert “Randy” Petzel, president, Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends; Bloomington Mayor Gene Winstead; MNVNR Manager Sarena Selbo; Pat Sutter; Steve Sutter; Sara N. Blood, interim executive director, Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends. Photo/MVRF

A thank you to our founder



In 2006, Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge found itself without a Refuge Friends group when Friends of the Minnesota Valley sought to refocus its efforts on protecting and preserving the Minnesota River. In 2007, **Steve Sutter** created Refuge Friends Inc. and helped in numerous ways to showcase, protect, and preserve the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge by providing volunteer support and funding for habitat restoration.

Steve has served in a variety of ways for the Refuge as a volunteer, volunteer trainer, bookstore manager, event volunteer, van tour leader and driver, and served in a variety of positions on the Refuge Friends’ board, including as a day-to-day unpaid administrator where he freely volunteered 60 hours a week and, toward the end of his tenure, drove four hours round trip from

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his home in northwestern Wisconsin. His accomplishments for the Refuge include (but are definitely not limited to) the creation of the Blue Goose Bus Fund and No Kids Left Indoors, which both provided an outlet for creating positive outdoor experiences to youth from all backgrounds.

From the information desk to youth fishing days, Steve greets visitors with a warm smile and a helpful hand while sharing his love of the Refuge. Refuge staff often remark about his can-do spirit and always lending a hand by leading in a grant request or making volunteers and staff feel appreciated. By the time Steve left his day-to-day responsibilities in September 2019, Refuge Friends had amassed a database of more than 900 Friends and Steve volunteered more than 6,500+ hours just as a Refuge volunteer, equivalent to three full-time Refuge employees over his 16+ years at the Refuge.

On Oct. 8, 2019, the mayor of Bloomington, Minnesota, proclaimed the day “Steve Sutter Day” in honor of his various achievements at the Refuge and in the community. You can see a copy of the mayor’s proclamation [here](#).

Steve continues to serve the Refuge as Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends’ board member.

Thank you, Steve, for all you have done and continue to do for the Refuge!

Your philanthropic dollars at work



Transport thousands of students from nearby school districts during the 2019-2020 school year with the Blue Goose Bus Fund. Schools where at least half of the student population receives free or reduced-cost lunches qualify.



Our new, part-time Interim Executive Director Sara Blood is paid through your donations. Among her many duties, Sara helps identify and write grants and pursues funding opportunities to help make urban, arts and other programs possible at the Refuge.



"ing Swim," a photo recently taken of a river otter at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge by Michael Kurtz. Used with permission. Do you have a photo or video from the Refuge you'd like to submit for possible publication? Please send it to hello@mnvalleyrefugefriends.org

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends Currents

Issue 9, Volume 1 | April 9, 2020



Dear Friends:

Since March 17, the two education and visitor centers at the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge have been closed to

Minnesota Valley Refuge Friends keeps members and visitors informed about upcoming events and opportunities through our *Currents* newsletter, which is distributed via email, through our website and social media channels, and at the Bloomington Education & Visitor Center.



Provide support for five interns and temporary employees at the Refuge in community outreach, conservation, and environmental education, giving them opportunities to grow and develop as conservation leaders.



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Engaging People with Nature.

MN Valley Refuge Friends is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. Contributions are tax-deductible.