

Visit to White Hawk Marsh Saturday, June 4, 2022

On Saturday, more than 25 people from Rush and surrounding areas enjoyed a guided tour by Dick Thomas of White Hawk Marsh, a 23-acre wildlife area at his homestead that has become a biodiverse wetland and upland habitat. The tour was organized by the Rush Recreation and Park Association (Rush RPA).

Dick Thomas is a retired federal wetlands conservation officer who served for 33 years. He says his “passion for wildlife” inspired him to start on the process of dedicating this land to biodiversity 20 years ago.

Dick started out by showing us a major expanse of wetland that, 20 years ago, had been filled in and was covered with a solid cattail marsh. This particular area had been used for pasture; even today farmers have an exemption to drain wetlands to make them arable. Over the years since the wetland has been restored, beaver have transformed it and left their traces, making water rise and fall, leaving behind dead cottonwoods that do not like standing in 2 feet of water. Dick told us that over a period of days the water level can rise and fall considerably, as water breaks through any buildup of brush. The shoreline in this area was made contoured and undulating to encourage wildlife: living creatures love borders and edges.

Because smaller wetlands can be drained or filled, we are experiencing overall loss of habitat. Any wetlands of 12.4 acres or larger are federally protected and the owner must get federal and state permission to disturb them, but also can get financial support to restore them. Dick applied to the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), “a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitat, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner” https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/home/?cid=nrcs141p2_018976 The WRP is a federal program with county offices, administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). With the guidance and help of this program, Dick dug “pothole ponds” one to four feet deep (five to six feet deep when beavers had their dams installed), the lowest and wettest part of a progression from water to vernal pool (wet at times, dry at times, protected from fish predators and home to some amphibians like wood frogs), to meadow and upland. Land areas are in a constant state of flux: wetlands will tend to fill in with land mass, meadows will tend to fill in with trees: “Succession takes over.” Dick said he likes to leave things as they are, but he mows once a year, or some spots once every few years, to keep woody vegetation from taking over meadow. Eventually he needs to engage in some reclamation or “enhancement” of wetlands and can sometimes get some funding from the NRCS to re-dig the pothole ponds.



Dick Thomas, our fearless leader!



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Why try to restore a landscape to habitat? Dick said, to increase biodiversity. A mix of “cover types” allows more types of living things to thrive and benefits us all. Dick manages 7-8 acres of pothole ponds, 23 acres in the WRP, and in total he intensively manages for wildlife about 40 acres. Species that are seen at White Hawk Marsh: lots of kinds of duck (the first wood duck on March 1, pretty early this year), warblers in May, waterfowl and songbirds, egrets in summer, Great blue Heron and Green Heron, otters which are “comical,” hawks and owls, bald eagle (especially when road kill is set down to attract them), “hundreds or thousands” of waterfowl in the fall when they migrate south. When asked about predators, Dick listed: coyotes, foxes, an occasional black bear with the “young male spring migration.” But he says humans are the biggest predators.

Dick grew up near where he lives now, and has seen variety and numbers of wildlife decline in his lifetime. He likes to foster amphibians and reptiles as well as birds. As a child he used to commonly see water snakes and milk snakes, but they are uncommon now. He likes to create a habitat for snakes (a “hibernaculum”) but it can be hard: they tend to like finding their own spot. Such creatures can be “indicator species”: they respond more quickly or more obviously to changes in the environment than we do. The Spotted turtle, which used to be common, is rarely seen now, as a result of habitat loss and also poaching. The Spotted turtle is very sensitive to water quality. Many amphibians, who breathe through their skin, are indicators of air quality.

Dick calls his refuge White Hawk Marsh. Even though there is no such species, he named it after an individual Red-tailed hawk that was unusually colored, that he has not seen now for 5 or 6 years. We did see a Red-headed woodpecker, who flew around and landed long enough for the experienced birders to agree on this sighting of what the reporting services still consider a rare bird.



Eastern Wood-pewee



Red-headed Woodpecker

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It took Dick a career's worth of knowledge, and 5 years of planning and applying for permits, before he started work on his wetland reclamation. The work continues with operating and maintaining all the varieties of habitat, while being flexible in the face of natural changes beyond human control that must be acceded to gracefully (e.g., the comings and goings of beavers, and dead ash trees that are favored by woodpeckers). Dick says creating this habitat took him hundreds of hours and 20 years, not to mention his learning and work prior to that. But he reminds us that you can foster wildlife on one or 100 acres, even in your back yard: all you need is "food, water, and cover."

Our thanks go out to Dick Thomas for his life-affirming work, and for guiding us around his wildlife refuge on this most beautiful day. ♦



Red-headed Woodpecker

Text: Carol Barnett; Photos: Ted Barnett