

On a tour of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge

Photographs
and article by Walter Horylev

It's less than 50 miles from my home in the Hilton area, has lots of interesting, walkable areas and a large variety of wildlife and it's free. It's the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, a gem of a collection of freshwater marshes and hardwood swamps bounded by wet meadows, forests, pastures and woods on almost 11,000 acres off Route 63, south of Medina and Route 31. The Refuge is about seven miles wide, east to west, and three and one-half miles north to south. Not only does it serve as a home for a large number of wild animals and birds, it's located along the Atlantic Flyway, a major north-south route for migrating birds, and many stop there during their journey.

I was privy to a personal tour of part of the refuge provided by volunteers Bob Schmidt and Carl Zenger.

Bob is the second volunteer at the refuge to receive the new Interagency Volunteer Pass, a reward for accumulating 500 volunteer hours at the refuge since January 1, 2007. (The pass entitles the bearer to enter all federal fee areas managed by agencies participating in the Federal Lands Enhancement Act at no cost.) Bob has accumulated over 11,000 hours as a volunteer at Iroquois NWR since 1997. Carl has been associated with the Bluebird Society for many years and has accumulated over 7,000 volunteer hours at the refuge, so I had a pair of really good guides.

We traveled about in a comfortable minivan, a recent Refuge purchase, and soon arrived at one of 125 bird boxes they have installed on the grounds. This one hosted tree swallows, others host bluebirds. One of Bob's and Carl's jobs is to band the birds; they do about 400 tree swallows, and 75 bluebirds per year. According to Carl, tree swallows will have an average of six eggs per nest. "Bluebirds will average around five eggs per nest, but they nest twice a year," Carl said. "In June, Bob and I sometimes band 100 chicks per day for several days, so we stay pretty busy." They also grease the poles to keep predators out of the nest.

Bob opened the box and removed one of the six young birds and showed me how banding is done. Carl held a wire with many tiny metallic bands on it. He opened one of the bands with a special plier that has pegs that spread the band open. While Bob held the bird, Carl showed me how he encircles the bird's leg with the band and then he gently closes the band with the pliers. The band is very light and doesn't put pressure on the bird's leg. It also has a unique number on it. That band number is recorded on a sheet and the information is passed on regularly to the banding lab of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Laurel, MD.

Our next stop was to visit a bluebird box - now, that was quite an experience. Bluebird mothers are not as docile when it comes to opening their nesting box when the babies are still in it. As Carl held a bluebird baby, already banded, and showed it to me, I felt something akin to a comb running through my hair (I didn't have my usual visor on). This happened about six times in a few minutes as we talked and examined the baby bluebird. It was the mother bird "attacking" me. Fortunately she was only skimming my head but she definitely was not happy about our activities. The bird was fledged and took off right before Bob closed the nest door.

At Cayuga Overlook, Carl pointed out a spot where he and another volunteer, Jeff, are rebuilding an observation deck. Bob chipped in with other things they are doing including tractor mowing of fields and fixing the dikes which control the flow of water from the four major pools that exist on the refuge.

Our next stop took us to an overlook where we saw several Great Blue Herons perched in a tree along with eaglets chasing egrets around in the sky. Soon all was calm and the egrets perched in the tops of the trees, looking like white exclamation points.

After examining several overlooks, we stopped at Ringneck Marsh Overlook, where a fishing derby had been held in June, and about 50 people caught bass, pike, bluegills and carp. Driving into the overlook we surprised a red fox, which quickly disappeared in the woods.

Bob has installed about 25 wood duck boxes in the woods to the west of the marsh and regularly inspects them, gathering data on numbers of boxes occupied, number of inhabitants per box, etc. He is responsible for maintaining around 400 wood duck nest boxes. Bob said sometimes he finds screech owls in them.

We took a special side trip to inspect one of Carl's clever endeavors, a device he calls a sparrow spooker. "Most sparrows are murder on bluebird eggs and chicks so anything that keeps them away from a bluebird nest is a good thing," Carl said. He saw a spooker on the internet and hand-built a copy of the contraption and just recently attached it to several bluebird nest boxes. It relies on some shiny plastic strips dancing in the breeze to deter the sparrows from approaching the box. Only time and study will tell if it really works. He also wants to find out if it causes bluebirds to desert the nesting box.

As Bob puts it: "What is that guy (Carl) doing now?" They obviously have a lot of rapport; which is good as the two of them do much of the volunteer



A baby tree swallow calmly allows itself to be held in the gentle hands of **Bob Schmidt**.



Volunteer **Carl Zenger** holds wire containing tiny numbered metal bands that can be attached to and identify birds.



While **Bob Schmidt** holds a baby tree swallow, **Carl Zenger** uses a special plier to close a band on the bird's leg. The band is very light and does not press on the bird's leg. Below, the inside the box view of a bluebird nest. Usually, bluebird eggs are pale blue -- about five percent of bluebird eggs are white and one was found on the day of this tour.



Carl Zenger and **Bob Schmidt** are pictured near a bluebird nest; these two dedicated volunteers put in nearly 35 hours a week at the refuge.



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work on the grounds along with about 30 other volunteers who also help.

One of the last points of interest we visited was the newly constructed Swallow Hollow Nature Trail on Knowlesville Road on the far eastern portion of the refuge. It has about one-half mile of



Bob Schmidt displays a plaque commemorating his completion of over 11,000 hours of volunteer effort at the Iroquois center.



A large baby bluebird. This one's mother "attacked" the photographer when the baby bird was removed from its nest.

boardwalk, accessible by the physically handicapped, on a 1.3 mile trail and was dedicated in 2006. The trail goes through swamp, dikes, and wooded areas and one can find wood ducks, geese, warblers, woodpeckers, chickadees and other wild

life near the passageway. Carl and Bob were instrumental in building the boardwalk and were justifiably proud of their handiwork. They each spend about 35 hours per week at the refuge and love what they are doing. "Bob and I wouldn't be here if we didn't enjoy it," Carl said.

We parted company after a well-designed and interesting two hour tour and I then spent some time with Dorothy Gerhart, the Visitors Service manager. She told me that the center publishes a newsletter about four times a year which is put together by her and volunteers and is sponsored by the Friends of the Iroquois Wildlife Refuge, a group of which Carl is president. "There are a lot of things we could not offer without the volunteers," exclaimed Dorothy. "They help us do programs for children and take part in community and special events." She added that more volunteers are needed as attendance at the refuge runs between 15,000 to 30,000 visitors per year; they are currently running around 20,000 visitors per year.

Established by the federal government in 1958 as the Oak Orchard National Wildlife Refuge, it was renamed the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge in 1964 to avoid confusion with the neighboring Oak Orchard State Wildlife Management area. The Visitor Center/Headquarters is located on Casey Road, midway between Routes 77 and 63, about two miles south of Medina and one mile north of Alabama. Office hours are Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. year round, except holidays. The center is also open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekends during the spring migration.

For information, call 585-948-5445.

Photographs and text by Walter Horylev.



The boardwalk at Swallow Hollow. The entrance is on Knowlesville Road, on the easternmost section of the preserve. Physically handicapped people can travel about one-half mile through a nature area. The trail runs for 1.3 miles total on pathways.