



# Notes

from the National Wildlife Refuge System

## Necedah National Wildlife Refuge Spring 2006

### Necedah Staff Cracks Code

By Richard King, Biologist

The red-headed woodpecker has been very abundant at various times in our Nation's history and was even considered a semi-domesticated bird in colonial times. The species is very adaptable, nesting in a wide variety of trees and habitats, eating a wide variety of foods, and even caching (storing) food. Yet, despite this adaptability, data from long-term monitoring projects like the Christmas Bird Count and Breeding Bird Survey indicates a steady decline over the past century. This presents a perplexing, decades-old ecological question: How can a highly adaptable species experience a long-term, precipitous decline?

The answer to this question will appear in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* in early 2006 when the Refuge publishes the results of its two-year red-headed woodpecker study. Studying red-headed woodpecker nesting ecology on its newly restored savannas, Refuge staff found that nearly 100% of the nest were in dead limbs. Sometimes the dead limbs were on living trees, sometimes on dead trees but the red-heads always drilled their nest cavity as high off the ground as possible and always in a cluster of trees with dead limbs. In fact, Refuge staff discovered that there is a critical threshold of trees with dead limbs around nests. Below this threshold, the probability of a red-headed woodpecker nest being present is very low. Above this threshold, the probability of red-head nesting rapidly increases.

The bad news for red-headed woodpeckers is that the sight of a cluster of trees (live or dead) with many dead limbs is considered unsightly by today's standards. Pockets of trees like this are often created by disease and insect outbreaks, wildfires and flooding but are just as quickly cut down in an attempt to salvage revenue from the timber and to control insects and diseases. The good news for the red-headed woodpecker is that the Refuge staff has solved the mystery of its decline and by addressing its critical habitat needs, we can begin to stabilize its population decline.

### Whooping Cranes Continue to Make a Comeback in 2005

Larry Wargowsky, Refuge Manager

Our 2005 field season proved to be an excellent year! While there were ups and downs, the size of the growing migratory flock increased by 23 birds; over a 30% increase in the total population. That wasn't the only good news. The first nests were built at the Refuge in the spring of 2005. And to top it off, two eggs were laid. Unfortunately, the first eggs were lost; predation is the probable cause. Newly-formed breeding pairs of whooping cranes need some experience to get it right. There is hope that there will be a fast learning curve for the new parents and that there will be some chicks this coming spring. This is a very exciting possibility!

There are currently seven whooping crane pairs that have bonded. Our field biologists are predicting we could have as many as 12 pairs formed by the spring of 2006. The migratory behavior for older birds of the ultralight-led groups is doing well. The majority of these birds are migrating from Necedah to their wintering sites in Florida. However a few birds from these groups have gotten off course such as bird 9-03. It strayed off course last spring and ended up in New York and briefly in Canada.

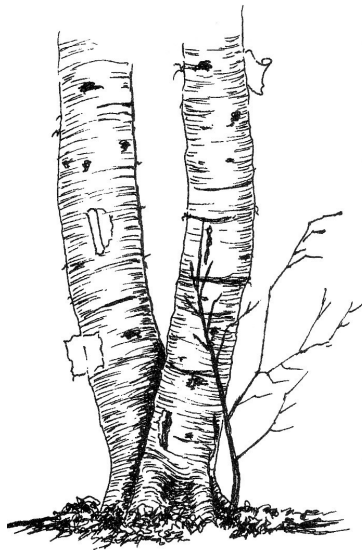
Crane 9-03 was not heard from for many months and then showed up in North Carolina in the fall of 2005. The tracking team found her and returned her to Florida to complete the migration. She is doing fine and looks very beautiful. The hope is that this course correction will allow her to migrate north this spring and end up back at the release site in Wisconsin with a better chance of finding a mate.

The fall ultralight migration began on October 14, 2005, with 20 birds and ended on December 13, 2005 with only one fatality on the migration. In addition, an experimental release program was implemented involving the direct

# Birch-bark Harmony

By Daniel Peterson, Park Ranger

While living in central Iowa, Amy (my wife) and I have longed to return to the woods. We have been blessed to live in many places including the north shore of Lake Superior. As a native of Wausau, Amy has a direct connection. My connection to the land—my wife says it doesn't count—were brief stops in Tomah for gas and cheese



while in route to the family summer cabin in the sand county of Bayfield. Who ever thought a Missouri boy would settle in this part of Wisconsin. Why Wisconsin? To most people cheese and Packer football are synonymous to what Wisconsin is all about. The sight of a black-capped chickadee in a birch tree reminds me of the dairy state.

Members of the birch family grow almost everywhere in the Northern Hemisphere and represent about 50 species, where they can grow to a height of thirty

to eighty feet. Although there are many species of birch, the white and river birch that grow here in Necedah are my favorite.

There is no mistaking the white, or paper, birch (*Betula papyrifera*). Its characteristic white, paper-like bark provided stock in creating birch-bark canoes for the native peoples in this region. This tree continues to spark interest with visionary artists and photographers to capture its delicacy in the forest while attracting tourists to purchase postcards from cheese shops with birch scenes as evidence they have visited Wisconsin; I have a shoebox full of them. The white birch is like the diva of the Wisconsin woods because of its extensive range and being the most common tree in the woods next to its aspen and maple companions.

River birch (*Betula nigra*) is typically found growing along the banks of streams and has peeling bark like its white birch cousin. The reddish brown, paper-thin, scaly bark is characteristic of young trees of this species. As they mature their skin tightens up revealing a course, dark, scale like bark. Back in Iowa we planted a river birch in our backyard to remind us of Wisconsin's charm, but it lacked a critter often associated with it—the chickadee.

The Black-capped chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*) is like the common loon--symbolic to the Wisconsin woods. This little plump bird with a distinctive black cap on its head is fearless when it comes to feeding on black oil sunflower seed at the refuge feeders. The chickadee, active and acrobatic, chatters words only other chickadees understand. And yet, they are so darn cute and beautiful in the landscape. I once

observed a pair of chickadees in early spring excavating a cavity in a dead branch of a white birch. Each individual took clumps of dead wood material in its beak and flew to a nearby twig to discard the debris. It was amazing the harmony that took place between the two -- never a squabble or argument.

It's great being back in Wisconsin and to now call it home. Like the chickadee, Amy and I are slowly excavating a new home in the birch trees of central Wisconsin--in harmony with the ravens, wolves, and beauty of Necedah National Wildlife Refuge.

## Wisconsin's Pelican Island

By Bill Peterson, Refuge Operations Specialist

Soil conservation was a relatively new concept during the Dust Bowl, when Driftless Area farmers literally lost their farms as expanding gullies devoured the land during heavy rains. In response to this and other national soil erosion problems, President Roosevelt created a new federal agency, the Soil Erosion Service (SES), on a trial basis, to reduce soil erosion and promote general conservation on farms and ranches. The SES' first order of business was to establish a demonstration area where at-the-time unconventional farming practices including strip-cropping and 4-6 year crop rotations could be tested on many neighboring farms. In 1933, the Coon Creek Watershed in La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon Counties was selected as the nation's first soil conservation demonstration area.

By the 1930's, the Coon Creek Watershed had been ravaged by 70 years of overgrazing and straight crop rows that ignored the land's contours. Aldo Leopold, an ardent project supporter, summarized its condition: "Coon Valley, in short, is one of the thousand farm communities which, through the abuse of its originally rich soil, has not only filled the national dinner pail, but has created the Mississippi flood problem, the navigation problem, the overproduction problem, and the problem of its own future continuity."

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**WANTED!!**

**VOLUNTEERS**

**Aliases: Dedicated person, greatest natural resource, priceless, exceptional, Wow!!!**

Anyone with interest please contact Daniel Peterson via email at [daniel\\_peterson@fws.gov](mailto:daniel_peterson@fws.gov) or call 608-565-4412.



# *Friends of the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge*

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## **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

2006 is unfolding into another busy and bountiful year for the Friends of Necedah National Wildlife Refuge. Your Board started the year by reviewing our strategic plan and prioritizing actions for this calendar year. In addition to our "regular" events and activities, we will develop a fund raising plan and increase our outreach actions to involve more Friends in our activities.

I was fortunate to attend the **Region 3 Friends Workshop** "Making Connections" held at the Minnesota Valley NWR in Bloomington, Minnesota, January 21 & 22. The goal of the workshop was to provide regional Friends groups with opportunities for networking and training to increase the effectiveness and scope of our support for our refuge. I had the pleasure of driving with Daniel Peterson, our new Friends liaison and we exchanged thoughts and ideas for future activities for the Friends and volunteers.

The workshop agenda was full. We had the opportunity to meet and hear various Regional and National officials and staff members. Of particular interest was a panel of legislative aides including Karrie Jackelen, aide to Congressman Ron Kind. Karrie is coordinating a meeting for representatives from Necedah NWR and Shereburne NWR and the regional office to discuss cooperative efforts regarding our potential visitor centers. Necedah and Shereburne are on the "short list" to receive funds for visitor centers.

**Connecting with Congress: Communicating for Your Station. The ABCs of Establishing Relations** was the topic presented by the National Wildlife Refuge Association's Director of Grassroots Outreach, Desiree Sorenson-Groves. You will be hearing more about this topic in future newsletters. We will be asking for your support and action on issues confronting the Refuge system.

Dan and I attended different sessions and heard excellent presentations on:

**Membership...Your Key to Success!** Your membership in the Friends of Necedah is so important. Without you we would not be able to function. We learned how we can increase the value of membership and hope you will agree with what we are trying to do to live up to our mission.

**Show Me the Money: Getting Grants and Selling Stuff.** Membership dues are important to all Friends organizations, but we need more funds to initiate and complete projects to benefit the Refuge. We are fortunate to have a Gift Shop that provides profits to our organization and educational materials to Refuge visitors. How can we better serve you?

Sunday morning we heard presentations from National and Regional officials. Jim Leach, Refuge Supervisor, Region 3 USFWS served as Master of Ceremonies and introduced: Rick Schultz, Chief of the Division of Conservation Planning and Policy, National Wildlife Refuge System ( who formerly held various Region 3 positions) who presented

**Strategic Planning: Moving the National Wildlife Refuge System into the Future.** This presentation provided material that will help coordinate our Friends activities with the Necedah Refuge strategic plan. We learned how all field station plans feed into the national plan and how we can better structure our activities to enhance the future for Necedah.

I hope to apply what I gained at this workshop to our Friends organization and to involve you in these activities. You are so important to the ongoing activities and future plans for Necedah. **I HOPE TO SEE YOU AT THE REFUGE!**

Jan Crosby,  
President

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## **Call to Action** by Shirley Siferd, Legislative Liaison

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**A**s Friends of the Necedah Wildlife Refuge, we are interested in supporting the refuge and doing all we can to insure its welfare. Accomplishing this sometimes involves taking positive action in legislative matters at all levels of government. An effective and easy way to do this is to work through an organization whose purpose is to protect, enhance and expand the National Wildlife Refuge System

One service of this organization is to offer an easy way to contact your legislators about issues directly affecting the Refuge System. If you are not already familiar with the National Wildlife Refuge Association, try this: Go to their website at [www.refugenet.org](http://www.refugenet.org) and click on Take Action. You will be offered a chance to sign up to receive action alerts. The informational material will be provided along with a direct link to the e-mail of your senators and representative. It couldn't be easier. One suggestion: When you send off the e-mail, add a personal note so your letter doesn't look like a "carbon copy."

Such action by Friends is important and is effective, as you will discover when you see the results of your participation. Let them hear from you, a refuge supporter, and you'll be helping the Refuge System as well as letting your legislator know he/she has an active constituent.

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autumn release (DAR) of chicks with older whooping cranes with migration experience. An additional five birds were allocated to this historic release, and project staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the International Crane Foundation worked with the chicks during the spring and summer to prepare them for their unassisted migration in the fall. Unfortunately, one chick was lost to an early accident, but the four remaining DAR birds continued on with their training. These birds started migrating in November. The DAR birds will continue to be monitored. It is hopeful that this supplemental method will allow us to build the growing flock at a faster rate.

The project is still evolving. Early efforts were aimed primarily at training birds to follow ultralight aircraft using isolation protocols to retain their wildness and getting the birds to learn the migration route and return to the release site. It has been proven that this can be done safely with the birds retaining acceptable wildness. The past few years of the project have been focused on refining the chick rearing and ultralight training techniques and increasing the numbers of the migrating flock.

The direct autumn release project is also a new dimension. With the growing flock of experienced birds migrating, it is now time to see if chicks can be trained to follow the older birds. This will not yet replace the ultralight led migration technique. This proven technique will remain the primary method of reintroduction as the direct autumn release technique is tested over the next 5 years.

Goals for now are to achieve a minimum of 125 birds in the population with 25 breeding pairs. With a total of 64 birds in the flyway, the halfway point has been reached in terms of numbers! We are hopeful that there will again be nesting and, perhaps, some wild reproduction next season.

From 1933 to 1935, the SES provided fertilizer, lime, and seed to Coon Valley farmers who agreed to follow a SES farming plan for five years. This prescription included rearranging their field layouts, strip-cropping, longer crop rotations, and retiring steep pastures. The SES also built a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Coon Valley to support the project. CCC workers built terraces, controlled gullies, stabilized stream banks, and fenced steep slopes to exclude livestock. Over half of the watershed's farmers signed up for conservation projects during the first two years. More would have joined, but the SES needed funding for 174 more soil demonstration areas around the country that followed the Coon Creek Watershed.

The unconventional soil conservation practices demonstrated in Coon Valley 70 years ago are now the standard methods for farming Driftless Area hillsides. Thanks to these practices, the Watershed's cropland soil erosion rate has decreased from over 40 tons/acre/year in 1933 to 4 tons/acre/year in 2000. As a result, sedimentation in lower stream floodplains has decreased from 6 inches/year in 1933 to 0.2 inches/year in 2000.

The Coon Creek Watershed project's success contributed to the Soil Conservation Act of 1935's passage, which established the Soil Conservation Service (now called the Natural Resource Conservation Service) as a permanent federal agency. Moreover, its success confirmed Aldo Leopold's belief that conservation can be best achieved by working with the individual farmer and landowner.