

THE SILVIO O. CONTE NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE REFUGE

by Beth Goettel

National wildlife refuges have always been for the birds. The first NWR, Pelican Island National Bird Reservation, formed in 1903, protected colonies of Roseate Spoonbills, herons, egrets, and pelicans from plume hunting. In 1906 the Game and Bird Preserves Protection Act was passed. In 1908 the Lower Klamath Lake and Lake Malheur Bird Reservations were created. Twenty-six more bird reservations were established the following year, and land acquisition continued over the following decades. Although refuges were sometimes established mainly to protect particular species, most acquisitions concentrated on strategically placed nesting, stopover, and wintering areas for a variety of birds, especially for waterfowl along migratory flyways. Today's system includes over 500 refuges containing over 92 million acres of valuable habitat.

Birders enjoy refuges and often travel great distances to take advantage of bird observation opportunities at national wildlife refuges all over the country. One would expect that they would flock to see the system's newest refuge, the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge. But visitors arriving at the Refuge's headquarters in Turners Falls, Massachusetts, binoculars in hand, are often puzzled and surprised when they ask, "Where's the Refuge?" This is no ordinary refuge. It may have less land than other refuges (just one 3.8 acre island so far), but someday it will provide more habitat than most.

In 1991 Congress asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to design a refuge to conserve, protect, and enhance natural diversity (native species and the ecosystems on which they depend) throughout the 7.2-million-acre Connecticut River watershed. Biologists found this to be quite a challenge. Areas in which waterfowl concentrate might be relatively easy to identify and purchase, but identifying and protecting habitat for migratory songbirds, migratory fish, and the hundreds of endangered and rare plants and invertebrates in the watershed is much more difficult. Little research has been done on the habitat requirements of many of these species.

Moreover, some species cannot be helped by habitat acquisition alone. For example, freshwater mussels depend on good water quality, which cannot be obtained simply by purchasing a stretch of streambed and adjacent banks. For others species, habitat acquisition may be secondary to the primary need for active habitat management to mimic natural disturbance regimes. Grassland birds, for example, may thrive on land that remains in use for other purposes, like agriculture; but they cannot persist on land that is simply acquired and then left alone, because it soon grows up into forest. Finally, it is impractical to protect enough land to provide for all the needs of widely-distributed species, like New England's large variety of wood warblers.

Biologists found that even an ambitious land acquisition program, targeting approximately 140,000 acres, would only protect two percent of the watershed. At the same time, they found that twenty-two percent of the watershed was already dedicated open space, including national, state, and local forests, parks and wildlife management areas, watershed lands, and land trust holdings. Additional large tracts of undeveloped land are held by electric utilities and forest products companies. Working with the owners of these holdings could improve habitat on a significant portion of the watershed — much more of it than could be protected by land acquisition alone — so that is what the Refuge will do.

The design of the Refuge relies on encouraging and assisting citizens and landowners to protect their plant and wildlife resources. To be effective, the Refuge must be active and successful in three complementary areas: education; research, inventory and management on land belonging to others; and land acquisition. Projects in the first two areas are supported by matching grants and cooperative agreements with Refuge partners, funded by the Refuge's operating budget. Land acquisition projects are supported by the Fish and Wildlife Service's portion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Because the Refuge has already supported over 100 projects, spread far and wide, it is a difficult Refuge to "see." You might see the Refuge mentioned in the credits of a videotape on Connecticut Public Television, or see a sign near a wetland or grassland restoration project in Amherst, Massachusetts. You might run into a volunteer "River Rover" at Rainbow Beach in Northampton, Massachusetts, who would explain the research they are doing on Puritan Tiger Beetles, a federally endangered species. You may have seen smoke from a prescribed fire in Stoddard, New Hampshire, last May, or a strange aquatic weed harvester on the Connecticut River in Holyoke, Massachusetts, in June. You could stop by the Montshire Museum in Norwich, Vermont, to see the new watershed exhibits there. You may have seen "Eagle TV," the live broadcast of nesting activities on cable TV or as snapshots on the internet. The best way to hear about all the Refuge's activities is to call the Refuge office at (413) 863-0209, ext. 4, and ask Fran to add you to the mailing list to receive newsletters; or look the Refuge up on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/r5soc>.

What's in It for Birds?

Of course, birders are most interested in what the Refuge is doing for birds. The Refuge has supported a wide range of research and management activities for rare birds. Findings from projects on Acadian Flycatchers (completed by the Metropolitan District Commission in Massachusetts) and Black-backed Woodpecker nesting habitat (accomplished by the University of Vermont in northern Vermont) may help foresters accommodate these species. Conte Refuge has also supported Massachusetts Audubon Society efforts to develop educational materials and work directly with landowners to encourage them to

employ management methods that benefit grassland birds. It is also working with researchers, the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Connecticut River Conservation District Coalition to help landowners maintain open habitat in Coos County, New Hampshire. This will benefit nesting Northern Harriers. The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection has restored salt marsh and native grasses and tested Osprey eggs for contaminants with Refuge financial help. Refuge funds are helping the Mattabesset River Watershed Association install nest platforms for Ospreys in Middletown, Connecticut.

The most interesting research being funded is an exciting landscape-scale research project, the Migratory Bird Stopover Habitat Survey. The study will show whether migrant songbirds concentrate along the Connecticut River and its tributaries during spring migration. If they do, the Refuge and its partners will protect and manage more riverside habitat. Dr. Thomas S. Litwin, of Smith College, is the primary investigator, with assistance from the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences. A cooperating organization in each state recruits and trains volunteers and coordinates the data collection. (These organizations are the Connecticut Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, and the Vermont Institute of Natural Science.) Over 100 experienced birder volunteers have completed point counts at 48 sampling sites over the past three springs, and Dr. Litwin will now analyze the data.

The Refuge is also interested in educational projects about migratory birds and their problems. It helped fund a bird-banding station that the Connecticut Audubon Center at Glastonbury, Connecticut, uses for educational purposes. New Hampshire Audubon used Challenge Cost-Share Funds to complete a breeding bird inventory and bird list for its Pondicherry Refuge. The Conte Refuge stands ready to help the Partners in Flight state committees and others with future educational efforts.

One project at a time, the Refuge is helping build a better future for birds and their habitats in the Connecticut River watershed. The Refuge and its many partners are working to keep you, your children, and your grandchildren supplied with plenty of birds to observe. Best of all, you won't have to come to a place with a refuge boundary sign to enjoy them: they'll be everywhere!

Beth Goettel received her B.S. in Wildlife Management from the University of Maine at Orono in 1976. She has worked for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and as a volunteer educator and writer with several national wildlife refuges and school systems. She is currently a biologist at the Conte Refuge.

(Announcement)

EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS HAWK WATCH

Annual Meeting

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch will hold its annual meeting on Friday, September 11, at Drumlin Farm in Lincoln at 7:00 P.M. (social hour starting at 6:00 p.m.). The meeting is free of charge and open to the public. This year's program features a new presentation by Wingmasters Julie Collier and Jim Parks. They will be bringing a number of live raptors, including a Broad-winged Hawk, a harrier, a Short-eared Owl, and a recently acquired Red-tailed Hawk that sports some puzzling plumage. In addition, Shawn Carey will debut a new video presentation, and Dick Walton will be giving a preview of his brand-new hawk ID video.

Volunteer Hawkwatchers Sought

Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch seeks volunteers to hawk watch this fall. You don't have to be an identification expert to participate. The best way to learn to identify hawks is to look for them as often as possible during migration. We need volunteers to hawk watch from well-known sites such as Mt. Watatic, Bolton Flats, and Wachusett Mountain, especially on weekdays, or from any location you'd like to cover, including your own backyard. Reporting the volume of migrating hawks is more important than identifying them all by species. For more information on participating in a hawk watch or on submitting reports of what you see, contact Paul M. Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155; telephone (781) 483-4263 after 7 P.M.

EMHW Information Available

If you are not a member of the Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch and would like to receive a copy of the Fall 1997 EMHW Report, as well as complete information on the Fall 1998 watch, fliers on "Where and When to Watch Hawks in Eastern Massachusetts," or a "Guide to Books on Hawks," please write Paul Roberts at the address given above and enclose a check for \$2 (made out to EMHW) to help defray costs.