



AGASSIZ AUDUBON SOCIETY NATURE CENTER BEGINS A NEW CHAPTER

By Brad Dokken, Published with Permission from the Grand Forks Herald

WARREN, Minn. — As an avid birder and nature lover, Heidi Hughes says the first two months at her new job have only deepened her passion for the prairies and aspen parklands many people in northwest Minnesota take for granted.

Her goal is to share that passion with others.

“This is the section of the state that’s the forgotten section,” said Hughes, new manager of the Agassiz Audubon Society’s nature center southeast of Warren. “You have to be kind of a special person to appreciate prairies and grasslands.

“I’m a big fan of prairies,” she added. “Prairies are one of the most endangered ecosystems on the planet. They don’t get much press. We have an opportunity to get people excited about the fragments of prairie we still have.”

Formerly known as the Wetlands, Pines and Prairie Audubon Sanctuary, the 640-acre site donated over several years by centenarian Eldor Omdahl is in the midst of a rebranding that better reflects the region, the habitat and what the center offers, Hughes said.

That includes nature trails and a visitor center Hughes aims to turn into a learning hub, where people can get the tools to go out and discover nature for themselves.

Handheld mobile device apps to aid in identifying birds and plants, and gear such as binoculars and GPS units are just a few of the possibilities.

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opposed to a nature center,” Hughes said. “People would feel equipped to go out and figure it out. We have so many opportunities here.”

EASIER TO MARKET

Hughes said the new name for the sanctuary will be announced Aug. 21 during the Agassiz Audubon Society’s annual meeting. It will be catchier, she said, easier to market.

“The key to all of this is marketing,” Hughes said. “It’s letting people know the cool stuff that’s out here; having an experience that’s easy and accessible.”

She said the site aims to pattern itself after Oak Hammock Marsh, a 14-square-mile nature destination about 20 minutes north of Winnipeg.

“It’s one of the top nature and tourism destinations in Manitoba,” Hughes said.

A New Jersey native, Hughes grew up 30 miles from New York City and developed her love for nature exploring the nearby Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. She comes to northwest Minnesota from the Pepin, Wis., area near the confluence of the Chippewa and

Mississippi rivers southeast of the Twin Cities.

Hughes has extensive experience in nature tourism. She was the founding director of the National Eagle Center in Wabasha, Minn., executive director of the Crane Meadows Visitor Center in Wood River, Neb., and executive director of Oxbow Meadows Environmental Learning Center at Columbus State University in Georgia.

Hughes also has written for several newspapers and magazines and authored four birding leaflets for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Curiosity, she says, drives her interest in nature.

“You never know where it’s going to take you if you have an open mind to ask the questions,” Hughes said. “I ask the questions and see where it goes.”

NEW DIRECTION

The hiring of Hughes begins a new chapter for the sanctuary, which recently emerged from a period of turmoil that included the departure of the previous manager and a near-complete overhaul of the Agassiz Audubon Society’s board of

directors.

The sanctuary also has more closely aligned itself with Audubon Minnesota, the state arm of the National Audubon Society. That gives the sanctuary access to marketing and other resources it didn’t have as a more independent entity. The Agassiz Audubon Society retains local control and pays Hughes’ salary, but she also works closely with Audubon Minnesota.

Mark Peterson, executive director of Audubon Minnesota, said Hughes was the “first choice” in a national search.

“I’m very excited to have Heidi as part of the larger Audubon team,” he said. “Heidi is a consummate professional, very knowledgeable with a tremendous amount of experience in nature education. I think people will find that she will be able to take the center operations to new heights.”

ON THE HORIZON

Besides the rebranding, Hughes said short-term priorities include improvements to the visitor center and other infrastructure and working with volunteers and groups such as Sentence to Serve to remove invasive plants such as buckthorn, Russian olive and honeysuckle that are infringing on parts of the site.

Hughes said she plans to meet with area chambers of commerce and convention and visitors bureaus to explore partnerships for marketing the center as a tourism destination.

“The place could become something that’s really big,” she said “I think I can market it.”

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WATERSHED DISTRICT DEVELOPMENTS

ROSEAU RIVER WD

The Roseau River WD reported on the Hay Creek/Norland Project. The Spruce Valley Corporation continues work on the Norland Impoundment. The Hay Creek setback and levees wetland replacement plan bid opening was conducted on August 3, 2011. Three bids were presented to the Board of Managers and are currently being reviewed by the engineer and attorney. Right-of-way markers were installed along the connection channel between Hay Creek and the Norland Impoundment and also along the property boundary from the west outlet to the southwest outlet.

RED LAKE WD

The Red Lake WD reported on the Thief River Falls Flood Damage Reduction/Improvement to Pennington County Ditch No. 1. The viewer's report for the project was filed with the Board at their regularly scheduled meeting on July 28, 2011. The final hearing for the improvement to Pennington County Ditch No. 1/Red Lake WD Ditch No. 14 along with the hearing to establish a Water Management District (WMD) for the Thief River Falls Flood Damage Reduction Project will be held at the Ralph Engelstad arena on September 13, 2011 at 7:00 p.m.

WILD RICE WD

The Wild Rice WD reported on the Upper Becker Dam Enhancement Project (Option D). Eric Zurn conducted a presentation to the Board of Manager's at their last monthly meeting. Following the presentation, a motion was made by Manager Erickson to terminate Option D, however, the motion failed for lack of a second.

Hughes said a flood-control impoundment across the road could be especially attractive to birders and wildlife watchers. Managed by the Middle Snake Tamarac Rivers Watershed District, the four-square-mile impoundment is part of the city of Warren's flood control project; it's also proving to be a haven for waterfowl and shorebirds.

"It boggles the mind how beautiful it is," Hughes said of the impoundment. "It's as nice as any national wildlife refuge I've ever visited. We have breeding white pelicans right across the street."

Hughes says she's planning a crane festival for the fall of 2012 to showcase the area's abundant population of sandhill cranes. The sanctuary also will revive its Christ-

mas and Great Backyard bird counts.

Long-term, she envisions prairie restoration projects, food service and perhaps even a bed-and-breakfast in the old manager's residence.

"You could spend a week here," Hughes said. "That's the target we're looking at. You could have a vacation where you could be a scientist for a week."

It all takes time, Hughes said, but she's definitely excited about the potential.

"I think next year at this time, we'll be cooking," she said. "There'll be people talking about us."

Dokken reports on outdoors. Reach him at (701) 780-1148; (800) 477-6572, ext. 148; or send email to bdokken@gfherald.com.

RRWMB MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

At its regularly scheduled August meeting, the RRWMB:

- Authorized Greg Holmvik to attend Red River Retention Authority (RRRA) meetings as an alternate for Ron Osowski in the interim.
- Received a report from Naomi Erickson, Administrator.
- Received an update from Julie Goehring, South Basin Mgr/Communications Coordinator, Red River Basin Commission (RRBC).
- Received a report from Ron Harnack, Project Coordinator.
- Received a report from Dan Thul, Red River Coordinator.
- Discussed the interviews conducted for the Public Information Specialist position and agreed to schedule a conference call with the Human Resources and Public Information Committees to finalize the details of the position.
- Discussed the board's financial commitment to the North Ottawa Impoundment Project of the Bois de Sioux WD. In August of 2010, the board authorized the reallocation of \$1,000,000 previously authorized for the local share of natural resource enhancements for the project and also an additional \$750,000 to be used towards land acquisition for the Redpath Project for a total of \$1.75 million required to match state funding. Following discussion, the board agreed not to commit any additional funding to the project.

EVENTS COMING UP

The next meeting of the RRWMB will be on Tuesday, September 20, 2011 at 9:30 a.m. at the Red Lake Watershed District, 1000 Pennington Ave. S., Thief River Falls, MN.

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