

July 1999

The monthly newsletter for people who live, work or play on the Upper Mississippi River

Vol. 7, No. 7 \$2.75

A Long Refuge History UMRW&FR Celebrates 75 Years

By Madelon Wise

The longest wildlife refuge in the lower 48 states and the one that sees the most public use — the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge — has a long history too. This year it celebrates its 75th anniversary.

Home to an impressive diversity of fish, plants, birds and wildlife, the refuge starts at the Chippewa River in Wisconsin, and runs approximately five miles wide and 261 miles along the Mississippi River to Rock Island, Illinois. The lands that make up the refuge lie in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois and consist of nearly 200,000 acres of wooded islands, waters and marshes.

Latsch and Dilg

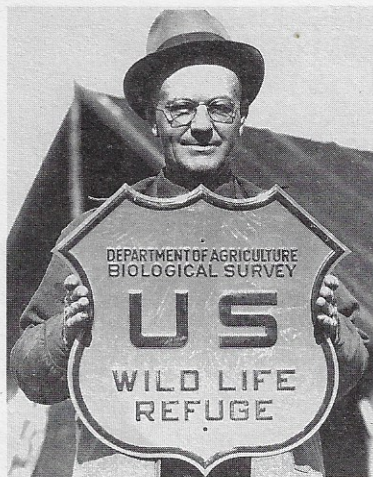
The refuge has its roots in Winona, Minn., because of the pa-

tronage of long-time resident John Latsch (see "John Latsch, River Philanthropist" in *Big River*, May 1997). A wholesale grocer and river rat, Latsch began purchasing bottomlands in the early 1900s to preserve them for future generations. In all, Latsch deeded over 18,000

acres of bottomlands and islands to the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and the City of Winona. His philanthropy also helped inspire the founding of the refuge.

Latsch was a good friend of Will Dilg, a Chicago businessman who fished for bass in the Winona area.

In 1922 a movement began to drain the Winneshiok bottoms above McGregor, Iowa, so it could be farmed. When Dilg learned of these plans, he



Ray C. Steele, manager of the Upper Mississippi Refuge from 1929-1958.

photo courtesy UMRW&FR

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A Few Bites for a Few Bucks

By Amy M. Mako

Boats can be a hassle. Many shorelines are thick with poison ivy. How about an easy fishing trip to one of the river's deep holes?

Privately-owned fishing floats below several of the locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi offer conveniences not often found on a boat. For \$5 to \$15 an angler can spend the day comfortably waiting for that big one.

We found seven fishing floats in the river between the Twin Cities and the Quad Cities:

Great Alma Fishing Float

This large float, across the channel from Alma, Wis., near Lock and Dam 4, is complete with a café, restrooms, benches, and sheltered

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formed the Izaak Walton League (named after the 17th-century author of a book about fishing) with his business friends who loved outdoor recreation. Impressed by the way that Latsch purchased and gave away land, Dilg proposed that this model be used to preserve the endangered bottomland.

Within two years the newly-

Each year the refuge receives 3.5 million visitors, who spend an estimated one billion dollars.

formed Izaak Walton League became one of the nation's largest conservation groups. League president Dilg's campaign began with an effort to stop 13,000 acres of wetlands from being drained, and it developed into a proposal to create the refuge.

He propelled the league to national prominence with his campaign. While the league held mass meetings all over the country, Dilg moved to Washington, D.C., and exerted enough political influence to get the refuge authorized in 1924, with an amendment that declared the primacy of shipping projects on the Mississippi River and prohibited "any interference with the operations of the War Department in carrying out any project now or hereafter adopted for the improvement of said river."

The measure (the Hawes bill) was adopted in the House without a dissenting vote and paved the way for a greater system of refuges that could be used for fish and game. Congress authorized the Department of Agriculture to purchase land for the refuge at the price of \$5 per acre.

When the refuge was created, the Army Corps of Engineers maintained a six-foot channel for com-

mercial shipping, but had not yet created the system of locks and dams. In the 1930s, Congress authorized the nine-foot shipping channel. The Corps acquired floodplain land to build the locks and dams. The new locks and dams flooded much of the refuge land. By a cooperative agreement between the Department of the Interior and the Secretary of the Army, those lands purchased by the Corps but not needed for the shipping system were to be managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

A Complex Refuge

The refuge now encompasses 194,000 acres in four states. It is divided into four management districts with offices in Winona, Minn.; La Crosse, Wis.; McGregor, Iowa; and Savannah, Ill.

Each year the refuge receives 3.5 million visitors, who spend an estimated one billion dollars on such recreational activities as fishing, boating, scenic drives, camping, picnicking, hunting, trapping, hiking, nature study, and photography.

The Upper Mississippi River provides essential habitat for birds, fish and animals in a Midwest with disappearing wetlands and forests. A major migration route for birds, the refuge enjoys the seasonal flights of waterfowl, tundra swans, canvasbacks, diving ducks, surface-feeding ducks, raptors, marsh and waterbirds. A variety of furbearers and other mammals inhabit its floodplain forests.

Jim Fisher, who oversees all four districts, explained that the districts have a good deal of autonomy and are free to respond to local concerns and issues, which is important because the refuge spans so many governmental jurisdictions.

The Winona District extends from the mouth of the Chippewa River, above Nelson, Wis., (River Mile 763.5) to Lock and Dam 6 (River Mile 714.3) at Trempealeau, Wis. This area covers part of Pool 4 and all of pools 5, 5a and 6. About

half of the district's 32,000 acres is owned by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The remainder is Corps of Engineers property managed by refuge.

The Winona District bands and tracks over 150 wood ducks each year. In cooperation with the US Geological Survey Biological Resources Division and the Canadian Wildlife Service, the Winona District participates in the North American Bird Banding Program. Additionally, the Winona District undertakes prescribed burns to maintain native prairie sites and manages several areas of significant biological interest, such as the primitive bottomland forest, the Nelson-Trevino Bottoms in Buffalo County in Pool 4.

The La Crosse District oversees Pools 7 and 8 (Trempealeau to Genoa, Wis.) and has been banding and recovering such species of birds as the American black duck, the green-winged teal, the blue-winged teal, Canada goose, mallard, northern pintail and wood duck since the 1920s. In coopera-

The refuge has become increasingly important to migratory birds, particularly as other habitat in the flyway is eradicated.

tion with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the La Crosse County Park Department, the La Crosse District maintains the Goose Island and Long Lake Canoe Trails. It also is involved in the Lake Onalaska Voluntary Avoidance Area and the various Corps-managed water-level management, dredging, and habitat rehabilitation and enhancement projects.

The McGregor District covers

Pools 9, 10 and 11 (Genoa to Dubuque, Iowa) and uses such management tools as cooperative farming, wetland restoration, law enforcement, closed sanctuary areas and environmental education.

The Savanna District spans Pools 12, 13 and 14 (Dubuque to Le Claire, Iowa). The Savanna District conducts Breeding Bird Surveys, and maps rookeries of great blue herons, double-crested cormorants and great egrets. The Savanna District also surveys bald eagle nests and red shouldered hawk nests, maps territories of raptors, and surveys rails and bitterns.

Changing River

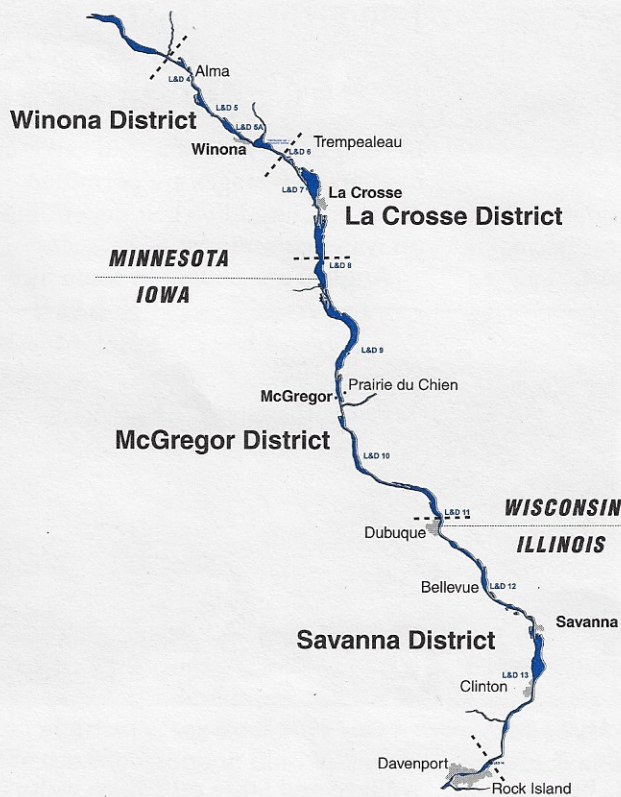
When the refuge was established in 1924, the shipping channel was only six feet deep. The river, however, was very polluted and many wetlands were being drained.

"The Trempealeau River Marsh had been effectively drained," states manager Jim Fisher. "Although the driving force for the founding of the refuge was bass, an evolutionary process began to recognize the importance of migratory birds."

Immediately following completion of the nine-foot channel, "the river blossomed for fish and wildlife." However, states Fisher, "Like all impounded areas, the pools have started to age," suffering such problems as sedimentation, and the loss of islands, fish passage and forests. "The river has gone into a slow decline."

Fisher talks about the importance of the Environmental Management Program (EMP), which has "started to assess impacts and has started to address them in a systemic way." He expresses concerns about the uncertain funding of the EMP's Long Term Resource Management Program, which, he says, has "been a very valuable asset to us."

The refuge has become increasingly important to migratory birds, particularly as other habitat in the flyway is eradicated. Now, for ex-



The Upper Mississippi Refuge is divided into four districts. Headquarters for the entire refuge is in Winona, Minn.

ample, 75% of the world's population of canvasback uses the refuge, he notes.

In the fall of 1997, the American Bird Conservancy designated the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge and the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge as "Globally Important Bird Areas in the United States". The honor is the highest level in the designation scheme of the American Bird Conservancy's United States Important Bird Areas program. It indicates the importance of the extensive wetland and floodplain forest complex which these refuges provide for migratory waterfowl, songbirds, shorebirds, and resident species such as bald eagles.

Although the river is in an ecological decline, Fisher sees hopeful signs that the Corps is willing to reconsider how it works with the river. It manages the water level necessary for the nine-foot shipping channel. "These constant high water levels impact the ecosystem, as

areas never dry out to rejuvenate," states Fisher. He is, however, impressed that the Corps has been very "accommodating in their willingness to look at drawdown and fish passage."

Fisher, who has worked on several refuges before coming to Winona in 1992, says that this refuge has more partnerships than most. "Most refuges have been well-defined, with a block of land that is clearly delineated and marked. The boundaries of the Upper Mississippi Refuge are amorphous and they encompass Corps

lands, municipalities, private holdings, docks, marinas and more."

Many activities on the river compete for the same resources — trapping, hunting, fishing, birdwatching, boating and commercial traffic. Along with the state Departments of Natural Resources, the Fish and Wildlife Service tries to balance uses. With a staff of only 32 for the entire refuge, they are limited in what they can accomplish.

By serving as a forum for the state and federal agencies working together on river issues, the state-run Upper Mississippi River Coordinating Committee facilitates an ongoing dialog on river issues, Fisher says.

Fisher wants to get more people involved in river affairs. He is excited about the budding Friends of the Upper Mississippi River Refuges, a volunteer group with chapters up and down the river. ☸

Madelon Wise is associate editor of Big River.