



The Talon

Rocky Mountain Arsenal and Two Ponds National Wildlife Refuges Volunteer Newsletter
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E. Blesiot

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PERSPECTIVE FROM THE REFUGE MANAGER

I have been at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) for eight months and it has seemed like a whirlwind ride! There a lot of activities going on; many challenges, but incredible opportunities as well. So far it's been a great learning experience (with a steep learning curve), and I've come to appreciate the knowledge and experience of this diverse staff.

I'll try to illustrate a unique aspect of the Arsenal operations: we have the task of restoring native short-grass prairie to approximately 10,000 acres of Arsenal property. This is a daunting challenge that could require restoration of more than 100 plant species,

some with unique propagation requirements, in direct competition with exotic and invasive plant species. This requirement is complicated by the need to restore large blocks of land at one time with variable rainfall from year to year. Historically, the plants would have germinated and survived during years of adequate rainfall with little or no recruitment during drought years. To overcome this variable, we use irrigation water which helps ensure germination and survival, but it complicates the process. Another variable that can throw a significant curve into the equation is the presence of prairie dogs. They are a keystone species of the short-grass prairie ecosystem and we want to maintain habitat for them to flourish on the Arsenal. However, prairie dogs have a habit of keeping vegetation chewed down so they can better see any approaching predators. This habit can destroy recently sprouted grasses and forbs that have been planted through our native restoration effort, and the species that usually persist through prairie dog clipping are undesirable invasive plants. If native species have a few years to establish a root system, they tend to persist through the prairie dog efforts to keep the vegetation clipped off. So one of our challenges is to preclude prairie dogs from expanding into reseeded areas, even though the clear, open expanses of recently seeded prairie look like the ideal haven to subadult prairie dogs kicked out of their parents' home!

Visit our website
www.fws.gov/rockymountainarsenal/

Calendar of Events

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Volunteer Meeting

When: Thursday, September 20, 2007 @ 7:00 pm

Where: Visitor Center

Plant Identification

When: Saturday, September 8, 2007 @ 4:00-6:00 pm

Where: Visitor Center

Please plan on attending to learn more about the amazing diversity of plants on the Refuge!



One solution we are experimenting with includes the use of a fabric barrier that is held approximately two feet above ground level with approximately 6 – 10 inches of fabric buried under the ground surface. Placement of a fabric “fence” along the perimeter of reseeded areas is an expensive, time-consuming job.

I’ve been very impressed with the staff’s knowledge in dealing with these variables, as well as the use of other tools to manage invasive “weeds” such as fire and herbicide. Combining all the variables and determining the best course of action in restoring native vegetation appears to be a combination of both “art” and “science”. Another potential tool was reintroduced to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR recently; the American Bison returned to this area on March 17 after an absence of more than 100 years. Bison grazing can influence plant species distribution and abundance through the timing and intensity of their grazing. Fire, as another habitat variable, can influence bison grazing due to the attraction of bison to the more nutritious vegetation produced after the cycling of nutrients following a burn.

There are many aspects of the restoration process that need to be fine-tuned, but the Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR staff has a dedication to these resources and a strong interest in creating the best habitat that can be achieved. The bison represent a milestone accomplishment in achieving restoration of the short-grass prairie habitat. There are several other areas that have habitat restored to the extent that bison presence could be further expanded, but the bison project is currently a pilot program to monitor several aspects of the suitability of this area for bison. Biologists will continue monitoring the vegetative response to bison grazing and the interaction of other species with bison. We will monitor bison behavior toward the enclosure and various aspects of their environment including enclosures around monitoring structures, exterior fences, and general behavior during the rutting and calving seasons.

Other opportunities that avail themselves include the prospects for construction of a new Visitor Center that should include partnering with other conservation organizations or agencies, and planning for expansion of public use facilities and future opportunities that may be available with increased public visitation periods. Some of the best opportunities for natural resource conservation that can be achieved at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR include the ability to create an appreciation and awareness of these natural resources to the American public. Programs geared toward environmental education and interpretation can provide tremendous benefits to an increased public awareness of environmental issues.

I'm enjoying the challenges and invigorated by the opportunities to work with such dedicated employees and volunteers. The abundance of natural resources that occur on the RMANWR provide incentive to encourage others to enjoy the occasional sighting of a peregrine falcon or the hunting coyote. As the habitat is restored and improves in quality, I expect the wildlife will respond accordingly. I look forward to the challenges and opportunities presented throughout the next several years in natural resource restoration and public use opportunities.

What do fish and bison have in common?

The Fish and Wildlife Service completed another summer of fisheries management on RMA lakes. Projects included, electrofishing, gill net, minnow trap surveys, water quality testing and bluegill stocking. Survey results indicate both Lake Mary and Ladora have stable populations of sport fish, but still require supplemental stocking of forage fish.

In addition, the reintroduction of bison to the Refuge prompted a monitoring program by staff biologists and volunteers alike. The monitoring which runs through September, tracks bison daily movements, behavior and checks the fence for potential damage. To date, no fence damage has been reported and the bison are doing great! Thanks to all the volunteers who helped make these projects possible.

As the Arsenal moves into its final phase of cleanup, volunteers will soon see many visible changes.

Beginning mid August, semi truck convoys are moving the old Stapleton crushed concrete (biota barrier) from 56th Avenue and Havana Street to the central area of the site. The Arsenal is using the material as part of a cover system to contain waste in place that will be permanently managed by the U.S. Army and to prevent wildlife from burrowing into the area.

Truck traffic is using the haul road that crosses 7th Avenue and C Street near the Visitor Center. Changes to this area include staff stationed at this intersection and newly installed traffic arms. From 7 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. the traffic arms will be in use and remain down. Staff will raise the arms only when it is safe to cross the intersection. The convoy of trucks could result in upwards of a three to five minute delay to cross this intersection. If the arm is down and unmanned, please wait for staff to return before crossing the haul road. Your safety is very important to us. The concrete hauling is expected to be complete by May 2008.

Other traffic changes on site include two road closures. A portion of the tour route, 6th Avenue between B and C Street, will be closed until May 2008 during the crushed concrete hauling. Ninth Avenue and C Street is also closed. Staff and signage are posted in the area to protect traffic and maintain haul truck right of way for the Former Basin F project. The road will be closed until November 2008.

In addition to truck traffic, other visible changes include the demolition of Building 111. Although rich in site history, repairs and upkeep are too costly to maintain the building well into the future, so it will be demolished in early 2008 and taken to Basin A. With the upcoming demolition, office moves are taking place between now and October.

With landmarks changing and the end of contaminated cleanup work less than a year away, more milestones were reached this summer. The much-anticipated Basin F Wastepile project was finished June 2007, surpassed expectations and was completed four months ahead of schedule. There were no nuisance odors on-site or in the community throughout the 14-month project.

Former Basin F, located adjacent to the Wastepile, began mid July. This is the last potentially odorous project. Crews are using the same odor control methods employed at the Wastepile. They also use an on-site meteorological tower to predict weather conditions, air-mixing patterns and optimal working conditions to ensure odors are not a nuisance to neighbors, volunteers or employees.

Details about these projects and others will be presented at the volunteer meeting on September 20.

