

“I Love What I Do”

By Greg Siekaniec

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Some weeks ago, I received a letter – handwritten, in pencil – from a youngster in Florida. “To Whom It May Concern” it was addressed, and then went on to say, “I would like to request the free booklet about endangered species and wildlife refuges. I’m extremely interested in wildlife.”

And the letter concluded, “I have also added 25 cents to pay for shipping and handling.” A quarter fell out of the envelope.

I hope that Cassandra’s sentiment is that of America’s youth. I know we’re working hard to interest youngsters in wildlife so they not only engage in wildlife conservation, but they one day also join us in our effort to conserve the wild places we are so passionate about.

Cassandra’s letter arrived just after I returned from an international mission to Russia. There, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continues to provide technical assistance. Through its rapidly growing friends movement, Russia is working to motivate its own citizens to become much more engaged in wildlife reserves and environmental issues.

And if those images aren’t enough, let me tell you about Bill Gates – wildlife biologist at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama. He’s working on gray bat recovery in what is almost the epicenter of such work, wearing a hat and hooded rain jacket and being pelted by guano while he gathers samples from Fern, Sauta, Key and Cave Springs Refuges – all Priority 1 caves for gray bat recovery. His friends think he’s crazy for working with bats, but Bill explains, “Recovering a rare species is always rewarding.”

What do all of these images have in common? Dedication, passion, selflessness, an enduring sense of wonder about our natural resources. Sure, all those apply. But there’s one quality – even more – that marks the people who work for, and work with, the National Wildlife Refuge System. That’s an understanding of what’s really important in life.

Some weeks ago, Edwin Drummond – called Drum by all who knew him – retired after 60 years of working at Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma. He was 81 when he retired, having lived all of his life on the refuge where his father was on the maintenance staff – a position that Drum took up.

When someone asked him some years ago why he was still working, Drum – never a talkative fellow – put it simply: “I like what I do. And what I do is important.”

Cassandra from Florida knows that. So does Bill Gates at Wheeler Refuge. So does the delegation we met in Russia. Now it’s our job – our mission – to engage our constituents

in such a way that they know and feel that what we do is important. I am glad you are joining me in that mission.