



National Wildlife Refuges

Wilderness Fellows

Through the Wilderness Character Monitoring Initiative, begun in 2011, Wilderness Fellows evaluate current conditions related to wilderness character. In subsequent years, the impacts of nearby development, climate changes, management actions and other factors can then be evaluated to better ensure the preservation of these wild areas.

Wilderness Fellows first receive training and then spend three months at each of two different refuges, developing an inventory and monitoring strategy, and producing baseline data about wilderness character. There were seven Wilderness Fellows working on 14 national wildlife refuges in 2013.

Here are comments from some of Fellows' blogs (www.fws.gov/refuges/whm/wildernessFellows.html):

Sarah Shpak Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Montana

Sarah has a B.S. in wildlife conservation. As a student, she studied insect and plant biodiversity in Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands.

“Biologists and technicians set up walk-in traps at seven refuge sites outside the wilderness area. Captured ducks were identified and banded by gender, age and species. In one week, 501 ducks were banded at the Medicine Lake, making this one of the most successful duck banding programs in the Central Flyway. Medicine Lake provides key habitat for the duck species we counted. As a wilderness fellow, I am collecting data on the status of the lake itself. The water quality, fluctuations in water level and amount of annual precipitation all affect the value of this habitat for migrating birds.”



USFWS/Nyssa Landres

More than a century after fur traders killed them off, northern fur seals have staged an amazing recovery on the Farallon Islands.

Nyssa Landres, Farallon National Wildlife Refuge, California

Nyssa has a B.A. in environmental studies and land use. She worked as a wilderness ranger for the National Park Service in Utah and the Forest Service in Alaska. She also researched sacred forestry practices in Bali, Indonesia.

“I joined a recent trip to West End Island to survey the fur seals; we counted the highest numbers of pups yet recorded: 537 adults and 152 pups. As we climbed to our survey site, the seals were everywhere. We passed a cliff hundreds of feet above the water where more than 20 pups huddled in the safety of the moss-covered rocks.

Sub-adult males with crowned foreheads wandered the marine terraces below us, scattering California sea lions and other smaller fur seals. When disturbed, the seals don't shy from showing how they feel. They stand their ground and let loose an earthshaking call. It's not a threat; it's more of a “Hey, I'm here!” Check out the sound here www.fws.gov/refuges/whm/NorthernFurSealPup.mov The pup you hear has the voice of a seal three times his size. If the seals' recovery continues, they may again reach their historic population levels of 200,000 in the Farallons, say biologists.”



Sarah Shpak banded ducks to track waterfowl migration through the Medicine Lake Wilderness, MT.

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Franklin Dekker, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska

Franklin has a B.A. in environmental science and a master's degree in geosciences. He previously conducted a hydrology study for the National Park Service on the Mojave National Preserve in California.

“...So it happened that Monday morning, after being outfitted in a flight helmet, flight suit and survival vest, I found myself in the backseat of a tiny two-seater Super Cub patrol plane flying north to Arctic Refuge...Our mission was to survey the refuge for anything unusual and land at backcountry airstrips to check on visitors and make sure hunters were complying with hunting regulations...When I saw four groups camped around a single airstrip, I considered impacts to solitude – what many visitors seek here. My field experience has helped me propose measures that address real threats to wilderness character and design a plan that will hopefully aid managers as they work to keep the Mollie Beattie Wilderness a wild place for years to come.”



Wilderness Fellow Franklin Dekker surveyed Arctic Refuge in this two-seater plane.



Newly hatched loggerhead sea turtles crawl towards the ocean at Blackbeard Island National Wildlife Refuge, GA.

Thomas Jablonowoski, Blackbeard Island National Wildlife Refuge, Georgia

Tom has a B.S. in environmental studies. He studied in Queensland, Australia, and interned with the Live Animal Center at Drexel University's Academy of Natural Sciences.

“Blackbeard Island, while open to the public, is a 40-minute boat ride from the mainland. This water commute limits visitation, and it's not uncommon to go an entire day without seeing another person. After performing my day's work on the beaches, I hiked over the dunes

and into the wilderness area, where I found nature at its wildest and solitude at its most serene. I didn't have to walk far until the beach disappeared and the sounds of the waves faded behind me. For the rest of the day, all I saw was untamed land, and all I heard was the fluttering of birds, the chatter of insects and the crunching of leaves and pine needles by foraging animals.”

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To read all of the 2013 Wilderness Fellow Blogs, visit:
www.fws.gov/refuges/whm/wildernessFellows.html

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January 2014