



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Silvio O. Conte

National Fish and Wildlife Refuge

Refuge Happenings: September 2024

The Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge presently includes twenty-three different divisions and units, located in the four primary Connecticut River watershed states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. The Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge is located in ten locations on the mainland and near shore islands along the northern shore of the Long Island Sound in Connecticut.

Summer Birding And Nature Program Wraps Up

As part of the Urban Wildlife Conservation Partnership, Conte Refuge sponsored a monthly bird walk this summer, focusing on sites located on the Great Springfield Birding Trail. The last of the five scheduled programs was held this month along the Connecticut River at River Front Park in downtown Springfield. Although a small group, the sites were large, with a variety of trees, plants, and birds to enjoy. Conte Refuge owes a huge thank you to volunteer Bill Randolph who led all the walks, and to the Springfield Libraries who coordinated the events and helped advertise and recruit participants.

For more information contact: Jennifer_Lapis@fws.gov



Photo: USFWS

Land And Water Conservation Fund Turns 60!

Refuge Manager Andrew French was invited to participate in a celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, with the Town of Amherst, MA and other partners who have contributed to work being accomplished in the Western Massachusetts town. Enacted in 1984, the LWCF helps to preserve, develop, and ensure access to natural and recreational resources for future generations.

For more information contact: Jennifer_Lapis@fws.gov



Photo: Town of Amherst, MA



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Team Work In New Haven

Staff from the Stewart B. McKinney NWR worked this month to repair an observation and fishing deck that was damaged by fire this past spring. The deck is located in the town of New Haven, CT at the Cherry Ann Street Park and is used by the public for outdoor recreation. Refuge staff Rick Potvin, Sean Healy and Ashley Williams demolished and rebuilt the deck in just two days of work.



For more information contact: Shaun_Roche@fws.gov

Photo: USFWS

Nowhere To Hide

Eradicating invasive species is a team effort. A crew from All Habitat Services completed the first treatment on common reed (*Phragmites australis*) on Falkner Island in Connecticut. This invasive grass occupies nearly an acre on the island and takes up precious nesting habitat for terns. Common reed also serves as a cover for predators such as black-crowned night heron, that quietly slip into the grass and hide while waiting for an opportunity to eat young tern chicks and embryos. The goal is to eliminate at least 75 percent of the invasive grass, however it is hoped that the refuge can eventually eradicate the non-native invasive species from the island.

For more information contact: Kristina_Vagos@fws.gov



Photo: USFWS





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Improving Timber Stands

A crew of thirty professionals used brush-saws to complete a 250-acre timber stand improvement project at the Nulhegan Basin Division. The project area had been clear-cut by the previous landowner between 1988 and 1996, which coincided with an exponential growth in the local moose population. Browse pressure from the moose on the new plant growth was severe and led to regeneration failure in portions of the stand. This created a distinct change in tree species resulting from the type of silviculture: Where once there was a mature mixed species stand with abundant softwood, now a visitor would encounter a stand of heavily browsed, sparsely stocked intolerant hardwoods. Next steps in the improvement project will be to plant softwood seedlings consisting of cedar, hemlock, pine and spruce in 2025.



Photo: USFWS

For more information contact: Jeremy_Goetz@fws.gov



Photo: USFWS

Nulhegan Basin Road Repairs

In July, remnants of Hurricane Beryl severely impacted the road infrastructure at the Nulhegan Basin Division. For the last two months, refuge staff have worked tirelessly to repair the numerous washouts across the refuge. By the end of September, all the roads at the Nulhegan Basin were made passable with the exception of the North Branch bridge.

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Mingling With Monarchs

On September 8th, Stewart B. McKinney NWR hosted a public program on Outer Island to connect families with migrating monarch butterflies. Participants learned about the monarch lifecycle, did related activities and crafts, tested live monarchs for OE (a parasite that sometimes affects them) and tagged healthy monarchs. The event was run by refuge staff, and volunteers Lorrie and Denna, who are monarch experts with years of experience. The Friends of Outer Island, who partnered on the program, offered discounted ferry tickets for participants, which attracted many newcomers to the island.

For more information contact: Shaun_Roche@fws.gov

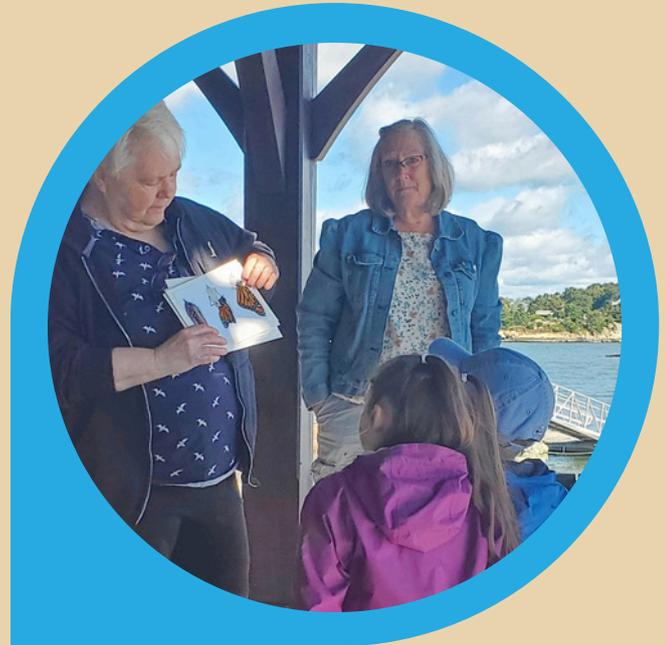


Photo: USFWS

Keeping The Refuge Clean

Following repeated incidents of dumping construction and household waste at the Refuge's Mill River Division, Refuge staff posted signs at the locations where the illegal dumping has occurred. The Refuge boundary and no dumping signs notify violators that they are illegally dumping on a National Wildlife Refuge. The signs will aid Refuge Law Enforcement Officers in prosecuting violators, as well as assist the public in reporting any illegal activity.

For more information contact: Dean_Rhine@fws.gov



Photo: USFWS





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A Growing Refuge

As more land is added to the Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, so is the need to post signs indicating the refuge boundaries. With the addition of land in Vermont on Glebe Mountain, Refuge staff found creative ways to access property boundaries that were not easy to get to on foot. With the help of Magic Mountain Ski area, getting to the top of the mountain to post boundary signs was made more efficient through the use of their chair lifts.

For more information contact: Steve_Agius@fws.gov



Photo: USFWS



Photo: USFWS

Seeing The Refuge By Boat

Early this month, the Stewart B. McKinney Refuge and partners hosted a kayak paddle at the Refuge's Headquarters, The Salt Meadow Unit in Westbrook, CT. The 25 attendees paddled the calm Menunketesuck River and saw osprey, willets, juvenile and adult little blue herons, great egrets, yellowlegs, terrapins, and crabs. The weather was ideal for a day on the water, and even though the refuge is situated between I-95, Boston Post Road, and a busy Amtrak RR line, most of the paddle was extremely serene.

For more information contact: Shaun_Roche@fws.gov





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Conte Refuge Equipment Upgrades

The Conte Refuge received funding through the Climate Resiliency component of the Inflation Reduction Act to restore Northern Forest aquatic and terrestrial habitats. A portion of the funding is being used to purchase heavy equipment to conduct the aquatic and terrestrial restoration work. The refuge recently purchased a new dump truck and an excavator to complete the work.

For more information contact: Steve_Agius@fws.gov



Photo: USFWS

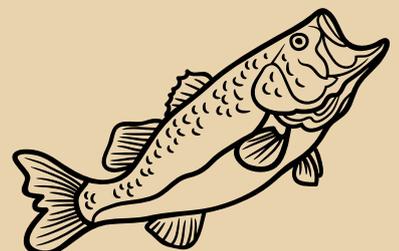


Photo: Connecticut River Conservancy

Aquatic Engineering Survey

In partnership with the Connecticut River Conservancy and BaseFlow LLC, the Conte refuge is working to identify and replace undersized culverts to improve aquatic organism passage. During the summer of 2025, CRC, BaseFlow, and the Conte Refuge will replace two undersized culverts with larger, more structurally resilient structures. The new structures will be designed to handle larger volumes of water and will provide better aquatic connectivity for brook trout that are native to the Nulhegan Basin.

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Planting For Pollinators

Over 200 native wildflowers were planted in front of the Nulhegan Basin Division Visitor Center parking area this summer to provide nectar sources and nesting areas for pollinators and other insects. Wildflower species planted include ironweed, black-eyed susan, mountain mint, wild sunflower, cardinal flower, New York aster, heart-leaved aster, joe-pye-weed, and common and butterfly milkweeds. This native pollinator meadow also provides an opportunity to educate visitors about the importance of incorporating unmaintained native areas, if possible, into their landscapes at home. These wild areas not only provide habitat for pollinators but can be beautiful too! The native wildflowers planted in this unmaintained meadow will increase the diversity of species for pollinating insects and provide a beautiful space in front of the Nulhegan Basin Division Visitor Center.

For more information contact: Steve_Agius@fws.gov



Photo: The Plant Native



Photo: USFWS

Invasive Plant Control

Management of invasive plants was a challenge to schedule this year due to the wet weather this summer. Despite having fewer days to work with, the contractor was able to treat most sites with herbicide at Nulhegan and Pondicherry Divisions. Our focus at Nulhegan Basin Division was glossy buckthorn, an invasive shrub that we've been treating these past few years along Nulhegan roadsides, and tansy, crown vetch and Phragmites that were encroaching onto Division lands from Vermont Route 105. Treatments at Pondicherry Division targeted tansy, honeysuckle, and purple loosestrife along the Rail Trail and on crown vetch and reed canary grass within Division grasslands.

For more information contact: Rachel_Cliche@fws.gov



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Nulhegan Basin Unit Turns 25!



Photo: USFWS



Photo: Judy Valente



Photo: Judy Valente



Photo: USFWS

In 1999, twenty-six thousand acres of ecologically significant forests were acquired as part of the Silvio O. Conte Refuge in Essex County, Vermont. The complex deal spanned three states, New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire. The acquisition was part of a 295,000 -acre package deal brokered by the Conservation Fund. The “Champion Land Deal” is still the largest private land transfer in United States history!

The 26,000 acres that became the Nulhegan Basin Refuge unit was part of a larger 132,000-acre sale in the remote Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. The State of Vermont acquired 22,000 acres for the West Mountain Wildlife Management Area, adjacent to the Nulhegan Basin Unit. The Essex Timber Company acquired 84,000 acres for working forests, with easements protecting specific natural resources and guaranteeing perpetual public use. Essex Timber subsequently sold this forest to Plum Creek Timberlands, who sold it to Weyerhaeuser, an American owned sustainable timberland company.

The Friends of the Nulhegan Basin Refuge helped celebrate this historic anniversary on September 21, 2024 with an ice cream social featuring April's maple ice cream from a local dairy. Speakers at the event included Jim Duncan, State Lands Manager for the Vermont Division of Forests, Parks, and Recreation; Steve Agius, Refuge Manager for the Nulhegan; and Rachel Cliché, Refuge Biologist for the Nulhegan.

For more information contact: Steve_Agius@fws.gov