



Spring 2011

BIG OAKS CONSERVATION SOCIETY



Newsletter of Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge & Big Oaks Conservation Society

President's Column

By Jim Leveille

Old Timbers Lodge – Where we stand

It's been nearly two years since BOCS initiated serious efforts to care for and preserve Old Timbers Lodge. The FWS refuge staff and Jefferson Range personnel have supported our every effort in that period. Though the formal agreement with the Indiana National Guard (granting BOCS stewardship of the Lodge) was signed in November 2008, winter delayed our initial major action until May of 2009, when members of BOCS gathered for our first group cleaning of the Lodge. That day, we filled a commercial dumpster (paid for by the Army) with old mattresses and obsolete furniture. We also removed and recycled nearly 100 metal cots left behind when Jefferson Proving Ground closed in 1995. The ensuing two years have seen us build on the momentum started that day. The receipt and expenditure of \$25,000 in grant monies toward rehabilitating the electrical and water lines at the Lodge were major milestones. Just as important, the several thousand volunteer hours donated by BOCS volunteers have and continue to have a profound impact.

Many of us attend the major spring and fall cleanups, but few of us witness the specialty work done by our core group of Lodge "technicians". Bill Hughes, our primary "Lodge Keeper", has donated hundreds of hours to wiring, plumbing, grading and mowing Old Timbers. The vegetation behind the Lodge is kept in check by selective herbicide applications during the year. Bill's farm expertise has been fundamental to our maintaining control of the Lodge's flora and vistas. The work of electrician Bruce Franks and Jack Smitha on our rewiring project was the key element in modernizing the Lodge's electrical infrastructure. Painting parties consisting of Fred and Dianna Swinney, Karl and Carol Poffinbarger, and Kavan Gray have resulted in windows and doors having complete facelifts and looking good as new - very painstaking and meticulous tasks. Likewise, BOCS can count on our blacksmiths, John Cummins and Gary Johnson, to continue their goal of hand-forging and installing missing ironwork and hinges. Tony Montgomery donates his time and professional expertise to spray for wood bees in the spring and to tend mouse bait stations through the winter. Not all of those who put in extra effort towards our Lodge do so on site. Donna Errett spends many hours researching and writing grant requests; Ken Knouf assists in publicizing our Lodge ambitions through his good works with the Jefferson Proving Ground Heritage Partnership – tasks critical to our fund-raising efforts.

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Old Timbers Lodge – Where we stand Continued...

The work we have done is impressive. Our partners at the Lodge, the Indiana National Guard and the US Fish and Wildlife Service are pleased with and freely express their appreciation for what's been done. As a member of BOCS, you have every right to be proud. But, we can't afford to stand around congratulating ourselves for long. Time and the elements constantly challenge our determination to preserve Old Timbers Lodge. The biggest hurdle to long-term survival of Old Timbers is the need to replace the roof and to renovate the masonry/chimneys. The heavy snow/rains of this winter have highlighted serious water infiltration issues through and around the Lodge's chimneys into the roof. Cement caps need to be replaced or more water damage will occur, eventually leading, not only to failure of the chimneys themselves, but also to damage of the wooden beams which support the roof. The asphalt shingles are reaching the end of their useful life, and the 80-year old copper gutters and downspouts must be replaced. These tasks are large, complicated and really demand professional expertise. Our membership has proven their mettle in dirty and difficult jobs, but fabricating new custom copper gutters, repairing chimneys and replacing flat metal roof sections are not jobs that lend themselves to volunteer labor. The importance of raising grant money, as well as seeking private and corporate donations, cannot be overemphasized. Generations of Jefferson Proving Ground personnel dedicated their personal efforts and government funds to maintain the Lodge for decades. Since BOCS has assumed Lodge stewardship, our volunteer labor has well exceeded all expectations. The challenge now is funding. Protecting our environment, educating our youth, and preserving a national historic site are altruistic goals which bind together the BOCS community. I am very proud of the work we have done and encourage everyone with a desire to be more involved



to do so. We'll see you at the Lodge on May 21.

Spring Cleaning Day and Summer Painting Weekends at Old Timbers Lodge

By Jim Leveille

We will be repeating our spring cleaning effort at Old Timbers Lodge (OTL) again this year on Saturday, May 21, and encourage all able members to attend. Cleaning the Lodge is not only fun, but sets up the Lodge for one of our most important public events, Outdoor Women at Big Oaks.

This year, BOCS members will have the opportunity to spend Saturday night after the cleanup at the Lodge. If you are planning to spend Saturday night at the Lodge, sign up by May 15 with Carole Poffinbarger (513) 868-7679 or poffin@fuse.net. Remember that sleeping cots at OTL are limited and that the old Army mattresses are gone. Think of the Lodge as a very nice tent with limited furniture. Water is also limited and not considered safe to drink. We recommend air mattresses or folding cots. Bring your own water for Saturday night/Sunday morning. BOCS will provide donuts and coffee Saturday morning and a pizza lunch. Although non-member volunteers are welcome for the workday, there will be no non-BOCS member guests overnight. Those who have not yet watched the refuge safety briefing video and signed for this calendar year will do so at the Lodge in the morning. On Saturday we will deep clean the Lodge and, weather permitting, work outside as well. On Saturday morning use Gate 6 from 7:15-8:00 am, which is located at the refuge fence and 900 S/Michigan Rd in Ripley County. Take US 421 to 900 S and turn west for approximately one mile – the road ends at Gate 6. This is a great chance for newer members to come out, mingle with fellow BOCS members, and to make a real contribution to our Lodge stewardship. Remember, please sign up, bring rags, and don't forget your gloves. If you are coming just for the workday or have any other questions, please contact Bill Hughes at (812) 689-5107 or whughes4@yahoo.com. We'll see you there. Additionally we have scheduled three summer "painting retreat" weekends at the Lodge: 1-4 July, 5-7 August, and 2-5 September (Labor Day). If any BOCS member would like to spend these weekends or any of these days doing painting or outdoor work at OTL "including overnight stays" contact Carole Poffinbarger.

Refuge Manager's Corner

By Joe Robb

Lost Americana

It was an early summer day, and I was glad to be out of the office. We hiked a steep incline up a ridge high over Otter Creek in the northwest portion of the refuge. As I walked behind Mike Homoya he pointed out plants, "This is the real Americana, something that the first settlers would have seen and is now rare on the landscape." Mike is the state's premier botanist and works for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, so he is someone that I intently listen to about such matters. Mike then pointed to the rare assemblage of plants, "This is a 'prairieoid' community; because of its location and exposure it is very dry on this ridge, so the plants here are adapted to dry conditions." He pointed out a small native blueberry bush and a scarlet oak, and then we talked about the possibility of a prescribed fire on the ridge and how fire would help this community of sun loving plants in the understory.

That botanical field trip was one of many experiences on Big Oaks that emphasized what has been lost in the landscape over the past 200 years. Gone are the large expanses of forest with trees so large that they rivaled the western redwoods in girth. If you have never been in a virgin stand of eastern deciduous forest, it is hard to imagine the look and feel of such a forest. We have scattered stands of mature forest on Big Oaks which have some aspects of those lost ancient woods, but they have history of harvest, cattle grazing, and other anthropogenic disturbance that influences what species they contain and the size and age of the trees.

Also gone are the savannahs and tall grass prairies and shrubland that dominated large portions of the Midwest. Perry Williams, Dr. Daryl Karns, and I have these philosophical conversations when we discuss our investigations into crawfish frogs on the refuge. Crawfish frogs need large grasslands with temporary breeding ponds with crayfish burrows. How did these frogs get here; were they always here? 'Always' is a relative term to a biologist. The nearest population to Big Oaks NWR is more than 60 miles away. Did they get introduced here by some military activity in the last 60 years or was it something more ancient? We are examining this question by taking genetic samples from the frogs in the hope that DNA

techniques could provide answers to their relationship to other populations. That would shed light on how long the frogs were here.

One possibility for how the frogs came to be here could be the old Buffalo Traces, ancient pathways that buffalo took from the prairie to the west to the bluegrass and canelands in Kentucky ('Cane-Tucky'). One of the largest traces crossed at the Falls of the Ohio just to our west. Crawfish frogs are still known to breed in old buffalo wallows in Oklahoma. A buffalo wallow is formed when the animal starts digging with its hooves and horns a 12-foot long depression about 2 to 3-feet deep into the ground. They used these shallow mud holes as a respite in hot weather and for mud baths. To me, **Bomb crater**



wallows look peculiarly like bomb craters that cover portions of the refuge. Perhaps crawfish frogs used these old trails as a path here as settlers opened up the landscape for their crops and livestock.

These questions on American habitats lost or so rare that they cause problems for the plants and animals that depend on them permeate our management on Big Oaks. It is a big reason why we are here and why the public finds our lands so intriguing. It is a place that harkens back to a time when we were just discovering what America could offer and what we would become as a nation.

Reminiscences & Reflections

Now Available

By Ken Knouf

The JPG Heritage Partnership is thrilled to announce that its latest publication is now available. Reminiscences & Reflections is a compilation of oral histories of people who lived or worked on the former Jefferson Proving Ground, along with historic photos, many of which have never been published. The book will be of value to understanding the history of the refuge. The project took over six years, and some of the oral histories date back over 20 years ago. The 345 page publication sells for \$30.00 retail, but is available to BOCS members for \$18.00. If anyone is interested, see Mike Moore, Norma Lou Irwin, Ron Harsin, or Ken Knouf.

2nd Annual Christmas Event at Old Timbers Lodge

By Jim Leveille

In December 1940, the Thomsons had their last Christmas party at Old Timbers Lodge. Two members of BOCS, Norma Lou Irwin (also president of JPG Heritage Partnership) and Louise Mitchell were there. Louise recalls that all the ladies present were permitted to take a small memento from the Lodge from an assortment of items the Thomsons were going to leave behind. It was certainly a more somber event than the Christmas parties had been in the years before. Mr. Thomson had passed away in 1939 and now his family was being forced to leave the Lodge and lands that had served as their family retreat for nearly a decade. Like 200 other families who lived on what would become Jefferson Proving Ground, the Thomsons were being evicted for the greater needs of national defense. After that night, all the families' personal items were removed from the Lodge. Mrs. Thomson donated most of the Lodge's heavy wooden furniture to the Tyson Memorial Library, which was being built in nearby Versailles. The furniture, chairs, couches and tables served generations. When a library addition was added in 2004, the tables were refinished, and the easy chairs and couches reupholstered. Seventy years later, almost to the night of the Thomson's last Christmas party, BOCS held their third Christmas event at the Lodge. Presented to the crowd were two



heavy oak tables. Tables that had once held holiday decorations and a feast for the Thomsons had come back home. The Trustees of the Tyson Library had

graciously donated them back to BOCS. This was a memorable and highly symbolic event - the first return of a Thomson artifact to Old Timbers Lodge. Bill Poor, Director of the Tyson Library, proposed another opportunity to BOCS. If the society was willing to pay for replacement chairs, the Library would return some or all of the original Thomson chairs that had been used at the tables. The Board of BOCS approved a fund raiser to buy back the Thomson chairs.

As the BOCS Christmas party got underway, the old Army transformer that services the Lodge tripped off, plunging the Lodge back 100 years in time. Candles were lit, while BOCS Lodge Keeper Bill Hughes and Indiana Air National Guard MSgt Kerry Brinson and his guardsmen positioned an emergency generator. The rest of the party guests steadfastly made merry in true frontier fashion. By candlelight, the fundraiser was announced. For every individual, family or group that pledged \$200, a Thomson chair would be returned to the Lodge. The patron's name would be engraved on a plaque that would hang in the Lodge and become a new chapter of its history. By night's end, thirteen pledges had been received and \$2600 raised for the project. The society is now well on its way toward the eventual purchase of a full set of sixteen original chairs.



The plaque will be engraved as follows:

Big Oaks Conservation Society
Jefferson Proving Ground Heritage Partnership
Daryl Karns & Pam Middleton
Norma Lou Adam-Irwin & Bob Irwin
Leroy & Mary Harsin
In Memory of Charlie & Hallie Miller
Harry & Toni Minniear
James & Sara Leveille
William & Beth Poor
The Bischof Family
Col. Rick Lohnes Ohio ANG
Amber Fields & Joe Robb
Bill & Wilma Hughes
The Westmeyer Family
For Glen Miller by Carole/Karl
Poffinbarger
In Memory of Emmett & Louise Williams by
Julie Miller

BOCS would like to thank the Jefferson County Public Library for allowing the group to conduct meetings and presentations throughout the year.

BOCS monthly meetings will be held at the Library the first Monday of each month at 6:30pm.

Outdoor Women at Big Oaks

By Dianna Swinney

BOCS and Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge are gearing up for the 2011 Outdoor Women at Big Oaks (OWBO) event. This year marks the seventh time the popular program has been conducted. On Saturday, June 4th, Old Timbers Lodge and surrounding venues will be buzzing with excitement and activity.

The OWBO planning committee, comprised of BOCS member volunteers and BONWR staff, has been working since January to prepare a fun, interesting, and educational day of activities for the participants. The entire day is dedicated to providing outdoor appreciation and interactive educational opportunities for women of all ages. There are 24 different learning opportunities being offered this year. Each participant will be able to attend three different classes. Archery, Bird ID, Life in a Creek, Outdoor Photography, Fishing, Canoeing, Dutch Oven Cooking, and Wilderness Survival are only a sampling of the usual classes. New for 2011 will be Falconry, Firearm Familiarity, Turkey Hunting and Calling, and Hyper Tufa Trough Making! Our volunteer instructors are well trained and come prepared to educate participants and expose them to all kinds of new adventures! A brief description of the individual classes will be available on the refuge website as well as www.bigoaks.org. We can be found on Facebook this year! Pictures from past events are posted, as well as discussion threads regarding classes and other pertinent messages. Feel free to "like" the page and add your comments!

The registration fee remains at \$45.00/participant if postmarked before May 1st and \$30.00 for any young woman age 12 to 18 attending with a registered adult. Registrations received after May 1st will be \$50.00. The fee covers all the classes, instructional materials, a welcome gift, continental breakfast, lunch, drinks and other refreshments throughout the day. A one day pass to Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge is also included. There will be a Raptor Presentation at Old Timbers Lodge during the lunchtime break, including demonstrations with live birds. Registration forms may be downloaded and printed from the BOCS or Refuge websites.

Another anticipated mainstay of the event is the Raffle! Participants will have the opportunity to

purchase raffle tickets or other merchandise. Raffle item acquisition is a huge task and many hours are devoted to the activity. Though it is still early in the process, we fully anticipate having a diverse collection of exciting items that will generate much interest! Proceeds from the raffle go towards expenses for the event and other BOCS efforts.

The OWBO Planning Committee has ordered up a day of beautifully clear sunshine for the day of the event! However, we go forward with the activities, be it rain or shine. We look forward to meeting new people and seeing familiar faces. Make plans now for Outdoor Women at Big Oaks to be your destination on June 4th!

Visitor Information

All visitors must annually view a safety video and sign an acknowledgment of danger form. This will give you access to the areas designated for public use. There is a daily access fee, or users may purchase an annual pass. The day use area covers 4,170 acres. An additional 22,500 acres is open to the public for special hunts and guided tours. The public may access the refuge from mid-April to the end of November every Monday and Friday and the second and fourth Saturdays from 7:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Big Oaks Conservation Society

Mission Statement: *To support the goals of wildlife conservation and habitat restoration at Big Oaks NWR; develop environmental education programs; enhance public awareness; encourage use and appreciation for the natural and cultural assets unique to Big Oaks.*

Celebrity in Our Midst

Big Oaks NWR and manager, Joe Robb, were featured in an article of Midwest Living this spring. You can look in the March/April 2011 issue or go on midwestliving.com to check out the article, "The Sensory Season". It is a flattering article listing many of the quaint sites in the Madison, IN area and shows some of the beautiful spring scenery that locals are accustomed to seeing.

BOCS Sponsors Fourth Winter Speaker Series

By Gary Stegner



Brian Winters

The Big Oaks Conservation Society completed its fourth season of hosting guest speakers at our monthly winter meetings. The 2010-2011 series began in November when Dr. Joe Robb, Ashley Buchanan, Perry Williams, Hillary Williams and Mardean Roach of the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge (BONWR) staff gave first person accounts of their experiences in responding to the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill. In January, Steve Knowles, Manager of the Falls of the Ohio State Park gave a detailed and fascinating presentation on the life of pioneer and Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark. Our February meeting was highlighted by Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) District Biologist Chris Grauel, who described and answered questions on programs offered by the State of Indiana to assist private landowners in creating and sustaining wildlife habitat on their property. In March, Brian Winters from Big Oaks NWR gave a first hand account of the 2010 Michigan Oil Spill and his role as a member of the team that helped to contain the spill. IDNR non-game biologist John Castrale culminated our winter speaker series in April with an in-depth look at the remarkable comeback of the bald eagle in Indiana.

BOCS extends its appreciation to Dr. Joe Robb and the BONWR staff for their assistance in arranging the speakers for this year's series. Again this year, the BOCS winter speaker series was one of the most popular and well attended events hosted by the Madison branch of the Jefferson County Public Library.

We are already planning our 2012 speaker series, so mark your calendars for 6:30 p.m. on the first Monday of the month and join us for another season of speakers.

Ninth Annual Take A Kid Fishing Day Moves to Mid Summer

By Jim Leveille

Take A Kid Fishing Day has been one of the most popular BONWR/BOCS public events. How can you beat a free family friendly event, all the hot dogs and snacks you can eat, great prizes, bait and a day at beautiful Old Timbers Lake? Since the first TKFD in 2003, this event has occurred in early June. This aligned TKFD more closely to the state's free fishing day and held the possibility of cooler summer temperatures as well. Last year, torrential down pours and a power outage caused the postponement of the event. It was rescheduled for July, though, with some concern that higher temperatures and the change in dates would hurt attendance. It was a pleasant surprise when the actual event proved quite popular with more attendees and even better fishing than the traditional June date. Perhaps competition with school graduations, as well as other free fishing dates in the area had served to prevent many from attending. To test this theory, this year's Take A Kid Fishing Day will be held on Saturday, July 16th. It is hoped that this new date will allow even more families and fledgling fishermen to come out and enjoy this great event. As always, volunteers will assist inexperienced anglers, and the refuge will provide rods and reels, as well as bait, free of charge. A free lunch will also be provided by BOCS, and our sponsors, including RKO Enterprises of Madison and Wal-Mart, will contribute prizes, including fishing tackle for the kids.

Park Ranger's Corner

By Beth Black

Working at Big Oaks Satisfies Curiosity

Have you ever been curious about what's beyond the miles and miles of chain link fence that surrounds Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge? Then you should join us for a refuge tour! On these tours, we drive through areas of the refuge not normally open to the public. We learn about the previous uses of the property as well as current management and the mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Sometimes we see wildlife; occasionally we stop and search for Henslow's sparrows. We always stop and see Old Timbers Lodge.



Luna moth caterpillar

Speaking of curiosity, have you noticed that the folks here at Big Oaks NWR are a curious bunch? A dictionary describes the word curious as "*eager to know about something or get information*". That is a great way to describe the crew at Big Oaks NWR. For example, Joe often mentions that his curiosity about the natural world led him to graduate school where he studied ducks and other birds. Today at the refuge, he manages habitat for Henslow's sparrows. Ashley's curiosity about the natural world led her to study yellow-rumped warblers in graduate school. Today, she coordinates the breeding bird survey that takes place on the refuge throughout the spring and summer. I'm still learning bird songs, and I often look to Ashley for help in learning a new bird song. Perry's curiosity about the natural world took him to northern California where he studied spotted owls in grad school. These days he's involved with not only birds and bird surveys at the refuge, but also the intensive study of the crawfish frogs found here at Big Oaks NWR. Our new newsletter editor Laura investigated Cooper's hawks when she was in graduate school. Now her curiosity has taken her not only to the new challenge of newsletter editing but also to the GIS computer and all of the amazing things that a person can do with that. Brian, Dave and Casey are fascinated by fire. The curiosity that is satisfied by prescribed fire is in seeing how the refuge and its inhabitants benefit from this activity. Mardean's curiosity has another angle. She sees the job of working with the budget as something like working a puzzle. She also shares in our interest of the natural world and in sharing that interest with others by using her background in public use whenever possible.



Sleeve protecting luna moth caterpillars

As for me, I'm curious about many different areas of the natural world. One area in particular is insects. I spent a summer as a roadside vegetation technician and vowed to learn my butterflies that year. For the following three summers, I worked as a gypsy moth trapper and that really spurred my interest in insects. Joe has an interest in insects as well, and when he would explain how he raised luna moths, I knew I wanted to try it. So last spring I raised a batch of luna moths from egg to adult. I found this to be a fascinating experience. The biggest challenge was keeping the larva fed. They grew so fast, devouring a limb of sweet gum leaves in a day. I was out on the refuge almost daily trying to keep up with their feeding schedule. Finally, around the 4th of July, my little moths had grown to adults and they were ready to be released. I felt like a proud mom sending her kids off to college. At the end of my luna moth foster mom experience I felt as though that curiosity had been well satisfied.

So, as the summer approaches, plan a trip to Big Oaks NWR and bring your curiosity. You never know what you will find.

NEW FACES ON THE REFUGE

Meet Our Experience Works Folks—Brenda Lewis and Mel Taylor By Beth Black

Experience Works is “a national, charitable, community-based organization that helps seniors get the training they need in their local communities.” Many of you may remember that this program was formerly known as Green Thumb. It has expanded to become an organization that provides training, job placement and community service for mature people (Source: Experience Works Handbook 2011).

At Big Oaks NWR we have two Experience Works folks working here this year, Brenda Lewis and Mel Taylor.

Brenda Lewis

While many of you have already met Brenda, we would like to share a little bit about her life. Brenda was born and raised in Jeffersonville, Indiana. She was married to Ronnie Lewis for 35 years. Around 1969 she moved to Columbus, Indiana, and from there she and her young family moved to Butlerville. It was in Butlerville that Brenda and especially her son Jason became acquainted with Big Oaks NWR. (Jason would move on to become the refuge biologist at Big Oaks for seven years.) Brenda began working here in 2009 and she has been a great help to us in all areas of our operation. Brenda is mom to five boys and grandma to eleven grandkids with four great grandkids. Brenda lives in Madison where she has 2 dogs and 10 pet birds. In her spare time she enjoys taking classes, being outdoors, reading and



being with friends. Brenda also enjoys traveling; she recently made a trip to Ottawa NWR in northwest Ohio, where her son, Jason is the Refuge Manager.

Mel Taylor

Mel Taylor was born in Taylorsville, KY. When he was four years old he came to Vevay, Indiana and lived on a farm. After graduating from Switzerland County High School in 1962, Mel became a carpentry apprentice, building bowling lanes. Then Mel



joined the 82nd Airborne Division and served for three years. When Mel got out of the Service, he went back to building bowling lanes. Mel joined the carpenters union and became a millwright where he worked to make electrical power companies operational. He helped install reactors and turbines and helped get nuclear and fossil power plants up and running.

Mel and his wife, Margaret, lived in Marysville, OH for 20 years. Mel and Margaret retired after brief illnesses and then moved to a farm near Hanover.

When Mel isn't mowing, bush hogging or building fences at his place, you will find him in his woodworking shop building about anything you can imagine. Mel also enjoys hunting rabbit and quail. Fishing is another hobby of Mel's, and you might find him angling for fish at the stocked pond on his farm. Mel and Margaret have one daughter, three grandchildren and two great grandchildren. They have a shih-tzu named Maggie and a yellow lab named Reese Cup. They also have two cats, Melvin and Crawdad.

Here at the refuge, Mel has been a great help with building signs near Krueger Lake and he also built a peregrine falcon nesting platform. He recently went through heavy equipment training and found that to be a good learning experience. We look forward to his continued help in the future.

Todd Gerardot - Intern

Hello. I am Todd Gerardot, and I have been an intern at Big Oaks NWR since late September of 2010. I am from Monroeville, IN, which is east of Fort Wayne. Here at Big Oaks NWR I have enjoyed a wide variety of experiences such as banding northern saw-whet owls, improving my birding skills, treating invasive species, prescribed burning, radio telemetry and other work with crawfish frogs. I graduated from Purdue University in May 2010 with a B.S. in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences, specializing in fisheries and water quality. In my spare time I like to spend time outdoors camping, playing ultimate frisbee, knee boarding, and, most of all, fishing. My favorite species to fish are panfish: bluegill, crappie, sunfish, and yellow perch, but occasionally I will fish for largemouth bass. I am also a big sports fan cheering for Purdue sports, the Chicago Bears, the Chicago Cubs, and cheering against their main rivals.



problem!) and low for henslow sparrow nests eventually faded from my memory because I came back again as a seasonal firefighter. Against every self-preserving, fire-fearing bone in my body, I became convinced that firefighting was not only safe, but fun too. For a brief period in my life, I was the Fire Program Tech on the refuge. Despite the blast I had at that job, I soon realized this wasn't the perfect fit for me. For the past five years I have worked as an intermittent Park Ranger and am thrilled to have the opportunity to become active on the refuge again as the BOCS newsletter editor.



NFWF BIRDING GRANT

By George Terlinden

Last September, Donna Errett and I applied for a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) grant to improve birding on the refuge. In early January, we received good news - the BOCS grant was awarded in the amount of \$4990! The goals for this project are to:

1. Create a current check list of bird species found on Big Oaks NWR
2. Distribute the final list in the local community
3. Purchase and plant native vegetation around the refuge office kiosk
4. Purchase and install benches at the same kiosk
5. Create and install markers identifying interesting facts along the new hiking trail at Old Timbers Lake and create trail marker brochures.

Presently, we are conducting bird surveys in order to update the current bird list. The planting of the native vegetation will start this spring and the benches will be purchased as well. As the weather improves we will meet with Joe Robb and his staff to establish the work schedule and to solicit volunteers to help with this project. The birders within BOCS are excited about this opportunity to enhance the birding experience for refuge visitors.

Laura Lake - New Editor for the Newsletter

Hello! My name is Laura Lake and I am a Park Ranger here at Big Oaks NWR. I am taking over the position of editor of the BOCS newsletter and would first like to thank our outgoing editor, Lisa Jones, for her hard work over the past three years. Thanks, Lisa, for the beautiful newsletter and the time and effort you've put into it!

To introduce myself a little, I am a stay-at-home mother of three; Claire, Kate, and Aaron and have a wonderful husband Ray. So, as you can imagine, I enjoy coming to work at Big Oaks NWR occasionally. My experiences with the refuge date back to the summer of 1999 when I worked as an intern. Living in an apartment near the airport south of the refuge, that summer holds many fond memories for me. I suppose the blood, sweat, and tears from searching high (Yes, that was my

Wildlife Monitoring in Alabama after Oil Spill

By Ashley Buchanan



I recently had an amazing opportunity to spend one month in Fairhope, AL on a work detail for the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill as part of the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration (NRDAR) team. The NRDAR process is authorized by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, which was enacted after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989. NRDAR also operates under the Clean Water Act, and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA). Through this legal process, a trustee council 1) assesses impacts and injury to natural resources and human uses, 2) prepares for legal settlement with responsible parties, and then once a settlement has been reached, 3) develops a restoration plan to restore wildlife and habitat.

Potential damage to natural resources or human uses could be caused by oil spills or release of other hazardous substances into the environment. In this case, the potential damage was caused by the explosion and oil spill of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010.

What makes this NRDAR different than others is size and complexity. The Trustee Council includes the 5 Gulf States (Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Texas), the Department of Interior (including U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service and others), Department of Commerce, and Department of Defense. This Trustee Council has developed 13 Technical Working Groups, which then design study plans to assess impacts. Study plans have been developed for birds, marine mammals and sea turtles, fish and shellfish, terrestrial animals, and deepwater, shoreline, and intertidal habitats. Study plans have also been developed for impacts to human uses, such as recreational fishing, boating, and shoreline recreation, etc.

My role on this NRDAR detail was a “Bird Planner.” I managed 6 different study plans focused on different bird groups. Some plans included sub-plans, and each plan was in a different stage of completion. Each day I worked with contractors, researchers, attorneys, and solicitors, as well as many other USFWS staff across the country to keep these bird studies moving along for NRDAR purposes. I also spent time on numerous conference calls, even some with BP and their representatives. I learned a great deal from several seasoned NRDAR staff. Because NRDAR is a legal process, documents and communications are strictly confidential. However, some public information is available which includes approved study plans and explanation of the technical working groups.

Knowledge gained from my experience during last summer’s wildlife response detail and experience working with birds greatly helped my work during this more recent detail. Last summer I spent 2 weeks on a wildlife response detail in the Mississippi Delta area. My duties at that time primarily involved reconnaissance of oiled and/or injured birds, recovery of dead birds, monitoring for new oil in the water and on beaches, and documenting displaced or washed up booms. During this winter detail, I learned how emergency response activities fit in to the NRDAR process.



Surveying for oiled birds from Gulf shore.

(continued on next pg...)

Big Oak's Connection to the Underground Railroad

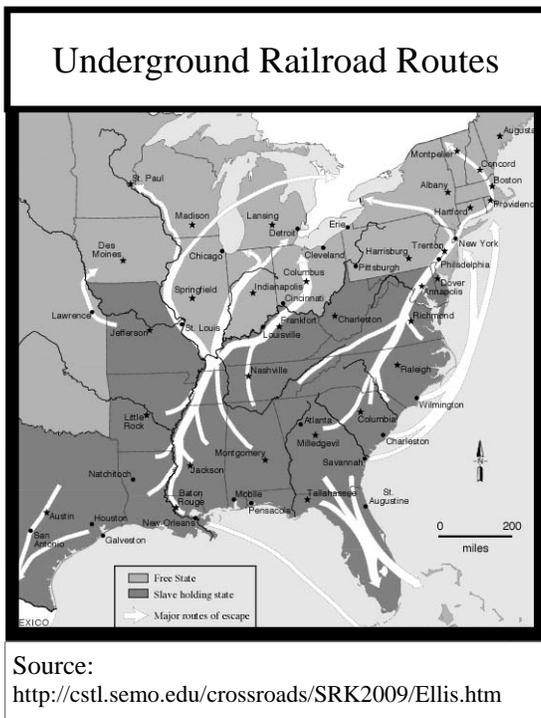
By Ken Knouf

Most members know that southern Indiana featured prominently in the Underground Railroad, that system of assistance to runaway slaves involving “conductors,” “station masters,” and designated safe houses that resulted in thousands of fugitives escaping north to freedom. The Underground Railroad (UGRR) operated generally from the 1820’s into the 1860’s, and Madison served as a primary destination for many African Americans crossing the Ohio River.

Once fugitives had made it to Madison and were hidden in homes and farms, the next step was to arrange for their safe travel further north. But many dangers existed. The Vernon road up to Hwy 7 had many southern sympathizers who would report any suspicious activity. And travel along Michigan Road presented hazards due to the number of people who used Indiana’s oldest and most popular road. Accordingly the safest routes for the fugitives followed those lesser used country roads and farm lanes that led north through Monroe, Shelby, and Bigger Townships—the three townships included in Big Oaks. Imagine the frightened fugitives as they made their way north laying low along Shun Pike (now Wonju) or Paper Mill Road (now Morgan Road.) The old Benville Road (J Rd.) was also heavily used as escaping slaves adjusted their travels east or west.

Next time you head up to Old Timbers and have just crossed the stone arch bridge over Big Graham Creek on K Road, the area to your left at Northeast Outlet Road was the site of Waddle’s Grist Mill, a documented UGRR station. Evidence of the millrace is still present, and there are other sites scattered throughout the refuge. Monroe Presbyterian Church site on Morgan Road likely was a destination where runaways received help as well as the Baxter family home site, located north of Cottrell, just east of Wonju Roads.

Ironically the reasons why the area was heavily used for escaping fugitives are essentially the same as to why the refuge was established: a vast area providing safe haven, first to fugitives and now to wildlife. And there were pockets of sympathetic people willing to help—just as BOCS members do today. So next time you are hunting, bird watching, or looking for mushrooms and find yourself at an old foundation, consider the possibility that this site may have provided safety and shelter to African Americans seeking freedom.



Wildlife Monitoring Continued on pg 10...



My duty station was Fairhope, AL, located on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay, about 30 miles north of the gulf shore beaches. Fairhope is a pretty, historic, southern town...picture massive, live oak trees covered with Spanish moss. Since Fairhope is on the bay and so close to the gulf, it was fun exploring the area, spending my free time on the beach, birding, visiting historic sites and Bon Secour NWR. I also ate lots of tasty, local food and got to know fellow “detailees” dedicated to spill response efforts. All in all, it was an experience I will never forget!

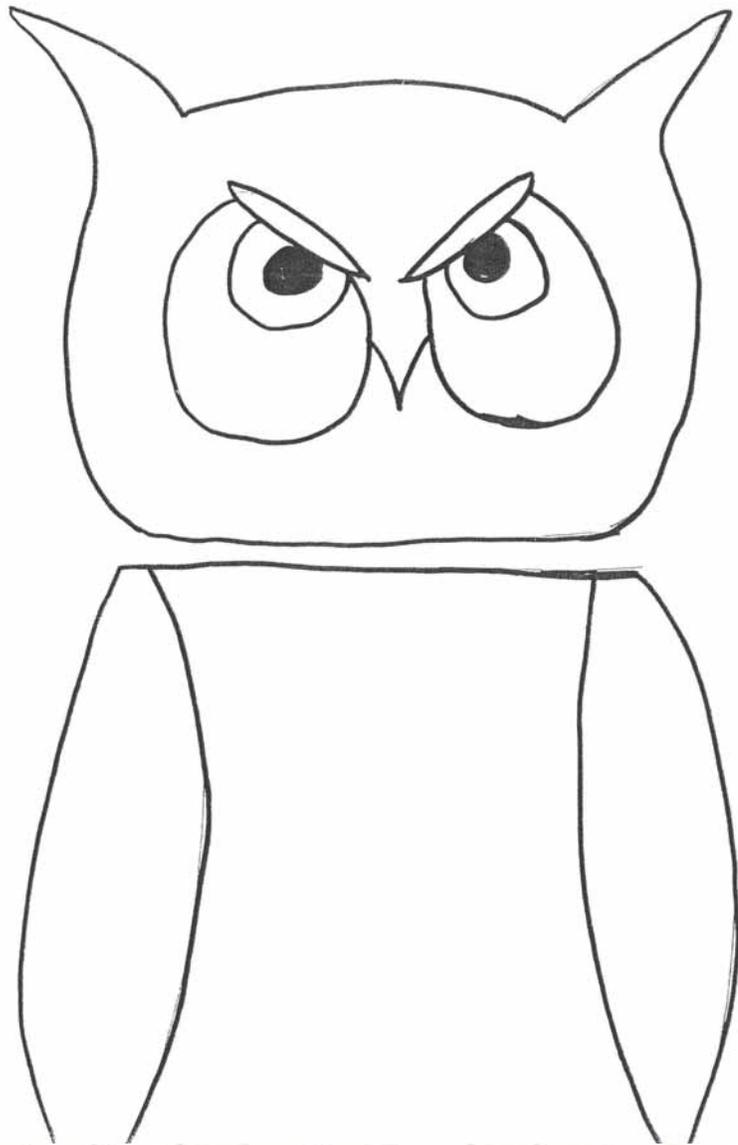
KID'S CORNER

By Laura Lake

While Big Oaks NWR may be large on many scales, it is still just a small piece of the big world surrounding it. No matter how hard we work to protect and preserve the refuge and the wildlife and plants it harbors, it will only last as long as future generations choose to care for it. As a park ranger and a mother, I know how important it is to educate our children about caring for wildlife. In addition, kids need to enjoy the time they spend outside to both appreciate it and to gain the benefits associated with being outdoors. I challenge all the readers of this newsletter to share this picture with a child and if possible share some stories about your experiences outdoors as they color it. Then, take them out for a hike and check out some spring flowers, birds, butterflies, and whatever they find interesting.

Did you know...

A great horned owl can carry prey that weighs three times its own body weight!



Picture by Beth Black

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Would you like to become a Big Oaks Volunteer? Opportunities are plentiful to assist refuge staff in their management of the 50,000-acre refuge. There are a variety of positions available.

Those who enjoy fieldwork and the outdoors are needed to lead wildlife and educational tours at the refuge. These tasks permit volunteers the opportunity to access Big Oaks at no cost and to see areas of the refuge not commonly viewed by typical visitors. If indoor tasks are more your cup of tea, then consider the refuge's need for speakers who can visit schools and civic groups to speak about Big Oaks. Those interested in becoming ambassadors for Big Oaks would receive instruction and training in the history and on-going projects associated with the refuge. For individuals who don't care to wander Big Oaks, vast spaces or are intimidated at the prospect of speaking to strangers, then the friendly U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff could always use help in their office. This could involve checking in visitors, answering phones, or aiding in the refuge's safety-briefing program. The opportunity to become involved is open to all.

If you would like to join or rejoin the **Big Oaks Conservation Society** to support the refuge, please fill out this membership form and send along with your check to:

**Check here for
Renewal**

**Check here for
New Member**

Yearly Membership Form (Oct. 2010 to Sept. 2011) Please select a category.

___ Youth \$5

Name(s) _____

___ Individual \$15

Address _____

___ Family \$25

City _____

___ Supporting \$25

State _____ Zip _____

___ Lifetime (per Individual) \$150

Phone () _____

___ Corporate \$500

E-mail _____

Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge
1661 West Jpg Niblo Road
Madison, IN 47250

Phone: 812-273-0783

Fax: 812-273-0786

E-mail: bigoaks@fws.gov

Website: www.fws.gov/midwest/bigoaks

REFUGE STAFF

Dr. Joe Robb - Refuge Manager

Ashley Buchanan - Wildlife Refuge Specialist

Mardean Roach - Administrative Support Asst.

Perry Williams - Wildlife Biologist

Brian Winters - Fire Management Officer

David Jones - Lead Range Technician

Casey Mefford - Range Technician

Beth Black - Park Ranger

Lisa Jones - Park Ranger

Laura Lake - Park Ranger

Hillary Williams - Seasonal Firefighter

Todd Gerardot - Intern

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Newsletter Editor
Laura Lake

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Joe Robb and
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Big Oaks Conservation Society Membership Benefits

-  10% discount on merchandise
-  Opportunities to participate in special refuge events
-  Contribute to the improvement of the refuge for all visitors
-  Big Oaks Newsletter



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**BIG OAKS
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
2011 CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

May	21	Old Timbers Lodge Cleanup
June	4	Outdoor Women at Big Oaks
July	16	Take a Kid Fishing Day
	30	Butterfly Survey
August	15	Squirrel Season Opens
September		Bird Migration Begins
October		Deer Archery Season, Winterize Lodge
November		Youth Deer Hunt, Deer Shotgun Season
December		Christmas Bird Count
January		Bobcat Tracks in Snow at Big Oaks
February		Great Horned Owls Nest
March		Prescribed Burning
April		Migrating Birds, Wildflowers, Fishing Begins



**Big Oaks
Conservation Society
P.O. Box 935
Madison, IN 47250**

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- Gary Stegner** - Vice President
- Dianna Swinney** - Secretary &
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- Joe Robb** - Executive Secretary

www.bigoaks.org