

Norris Camp News

News from the Red Lake Wildlife Management Area Headquarters
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources – Wildlife Division

Issue 38—April 2018



Upcoming Events...

♦ Monday, April 16: Statewide Deer Management Plan Open House

Come to Hayes Lake State Park and learn about the newly proposed Statewide Deer Plan and give us your comments. This will be at the Park office from 6-9 PM. Coffee and cookies will be served.

<https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/mammals/deer/management/planning/index.html>

♦ April Grouse Blind Opportunities:

Check out the sharp-tail and ruffed grouse pictures above. If you'd like to get up close to either of these birds, reserve a blind. Just call Norris Camp (218) 783-6861 to watch a ruffed grouse drum or the Baudette Area Wildlife office at (218) 634-1705 (ext. 222) to observe sharp-tails dancing.

♦ May School Field Trips:

The Baudette 4th graders and Warroad 1st graders will be at Norris Camp during the last week in May for their annual field trips.

♦ Saturday, June 30: Dragonfly Public Program

Mark your calendar—The Minnesota Dragonfly Society will be giving a presentation and helping people catch and identify dragonflies in the Norris Camp area. This program is sponsored by the Enbridge Eco-Footprint Grant Program. We encourage you to come learn about dragonflies! Call Norris Camp at 218-783-6861 for more information.

Winter Severity Index

The Winter Severity Index, an indicator of the effects of winter weather on wildlife, was 93 at Norris Camp on April 9, 2018. Points are accrued for every day with a temperature below zero and/or greater than 15 inches of snow, so cold days with lots of snow can accrue 2 points. The long term average at Norris Camp is about 102, with points accruing relatively early this year because of late fall snow accumulation. Still, we don't expect this to have an effect on the deer population, and lots of fluffy snow likely benefitted ruffed grouse.

2017 Hunting Season Updates

The grouse season was slower than expected. High drumming counts during the spring of 2017 led many people to believe that the

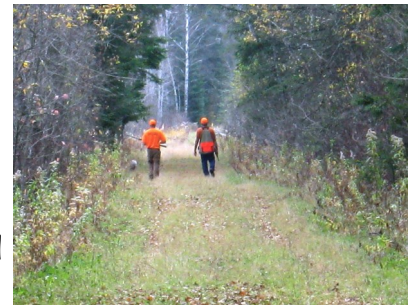


Photo by Bruce Mills

fall of 2017 was going to be one of the better grouse hunting seasons in recent memory. As it was, 2017 was another average season in the Beltrami Island area. Unfortunate timing of spring rains likely had an impact on chick survival yet again.

It was another slow deer hunting season in the Beltrami Island area as well. Hunters harvested 568 deer (428 bucks and 140 antlerless) in Deer Permit Area 111 during the 2017 season. Interestingly, harvest

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2017 Hunting Season Updates

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went down despite an increase in the number of antlerless lottery permits available (350, compared to 100 in 2016). Harvest declines were likely related to a blizzard during the opening weekend of the firearm season that made life difficult for deer and humans alike. Anecdotal observations indicate that there are far more deer in the forest than at any time in recent memory, so we are looking forward to a strong rebound in harvest next year.

2017/2018 Trapping Season

The number of otter, bobcat, and fisher registered in the Beltrami Island area in 2017 was consistent with those registered in 2016. However, there was a notable uptick in the marten harvest, which went from a harvest of 25 animals in 2016 to 56 animals in 2017. This is good news for marten enthusiasts, as there seem to be a lot of marten in the woods. The DNR does not have a good way of tracking the populations of some animal species, including squirrels, but there seems to be no shortage of red squirrels in the forest right now. This may be one reason for the apparent rise in the marten population. Red squirrels are a favorite food of martens, who can use their small size to enter red squirrel dens, or catch them when squirrels are foraging.

Owl Count/Goshawk Survey

Ten students in the natural resources program at the University of Minnesota Crookston Campus came to Norris Camp in late March to help out with a couple of sur-

veys. They didn't get much sleep because they were out looking for owls until around midnight and then got up just before dawn to look for goshawks. But they did say they enjoyed their time in the quiet night and early morning woods listening and watching for birds.



Beltrami Island State Forest Christmas Bird Count

This hardy little red-breasted nuthatch (photo by Beth Siverhus) was one of the birds observed during this year's annual Christmas Bird Count. The last day of December was cold, with a low of minus 30 F. and a high of just -10.

There were eleven participants this year on the count. The survey area surrounds Martin Kehoe's cabin between the Pitt Grade and the Faunce Road. Martin got a little cold skiing in to his cabin as you can tell from his picture. After a collective effort of 45 hours, 15 species for a total of 110 birds were observed. A potluck meal back at Norris Camp warmed everyone back up.



Historic Caribou Fence



The Beltrami Island area was one of the last areas in Minnesota to be settled by European Americans. Because European settlers did not arrive until the early 1900's, many artifacts of these early European American settlers can still be found in the area today. One of these artifacts is Norris Camp, which is a National Historic Site because it was a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp from 1936-1941, but other artifacts in the area abound as well.

Norris Camp staff were contacted last year by David Mather, an archaeologist from the MN State Historic Preservation Office. Mather wanted to gather some information about an old caribou enclosure in Red Lake Peatland that he was interested in potentially adding to the National Historic Registry.

Background: When Norris Camp was a CCC camp, workers completed infrastructure projects, tore down remnants from abandoned homesteads, and also worked on conservation projects like planting trees and re-establishing wildlife populations. One of the projects they worked on was preserving the last remaining herd of woodland caribou in the lower 48 states. Woodland caribou were historically native to northern Minnesota, but their numbers had declined from habitat loss, hunting, and parasites carried by white-tailed deer.

The last caribou known to exist south of Canada were located in the Red Lake Peatland and in 1938, ten caribou were brought from

Saskatchewan to supplement the herd. These introduced animals were given a "soft-release" whereby they were first released into a 1,000 hectare enclosure in order to acclimate before a final release into the wild. This necessitated the construction of a large fence in a remote peatland area north of Upper Red Lake. In addition to the fence, CCC workers also built a small cabin for a worker who would be a caretaker of the herd until their release. Remnants of both the cabin, the fence, and an old powerline running parallel to the ditch grade can still be found in this area, near Hillman Lake.



Above: Archaeologist David Mather of the State Historic Preservation Office inspects a power pole along the ditch grade in the bog. Some of the power poles still had electric line drooping between them and glass insulators on the poles.

Fast forward to today, and these remnants are of archaeological interest. Mather wanted to visit this area to document what remained of the remnants and get a sense of whether they merit

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Historic Caribou Fence

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consideration on the National Historic Registry. First, he wanted to visit the site in June and we had to explain that long ventures into bogs are best made in winter when the ground is frozen.

Eventually we arranged for Mather to visit in February, and the result of his inquiry was that some of us were able to see portions of our work area we had never seen and that this site may be added to the Historic Registry, depending upon Mather's opinion and further review. According to Mather, there aren't any other sites in Minnesota that are on the Historic Registry because of their contribution to conservation, and in his opinion, that made this site unique. So on a cold February day, several of us rode snowmobiles into Red Lake Peatland



Above: Looking north along the eastern side of the caribou pasture, one can see fence posts and the stagnant spruce trees that dot the landscape. Despite their small size, these trees could be over one hundred years old because they grow in nutrient-poor conditions.

looking for an 80-year old fence, a derelict cabin, and anything else that might be interesting to an archaeologist. We rode north along a ditch that was slowly filling in since it was dug in the 1920's. The trees got shorter as we progressed



Above: The remains of a cabin that was used by a caretaker to watch over the last remaining caribou in Minnesota during the 1940's.

into the peatland, and eventually someone spotted what remained of an old power pole cut from black spruce trees.

Farther up the ditch grade we saw more power poles, and eventually came to the old caretaker's cabin. The roof on it had collapsed, and a previous visitor had tried to use a snowmobile belt to prevent the walls from falling farther in on themselves.

After viewing the cabin and heading north, more fence poles were visible along the ditch grade. Eventually, we came to what had been called the "caribou pasture" which was an open area of stagnant peatland forest that had been fenced off to contain the caribou prior to release. It is a barren landscape in winter, and although caribou naturally subsist on lichens during winter, due to the small size of the pasture, one of the tasks of the cabin caretaker had been to bring the caribou fresh bales of hay.

After a long day in the cold, we headed back to the vehicles and hoped that Mather had gotten the documentation that he came for. In the future, maybe this lonely spot will be officially recognized as National Historic Site.

Black Bear Research & School Groups

During the fall of 2016, Norris Camp staff found a bear den near the Faunce-Butterfield Road in a stand of old-growth pines. Incidentally, Gretchen Mehmel, manager at Norris Camp, was familiar with a grouse hunter who frequents Red Lake WMA and who works for Advanced Telemetry Systems (ATS) in Isanti, MN. This hunter facilitated the generous donation by ATS of a collar. So we worked with DNR bear researchers to deploy the collar last winter.

Part of the impetus for collaring this bear was to partner with local school groups and get them interested in bear biology. The collar was pretty fancy, and recorded waypoints via GPS that could be downloaded and viewed on the internet. Norris Camp staff sent the waypoints to several school classes so they could prepare for a visit to the bear den. In early March, Norris Camp staff, DNR bear researchers, and several classes of kids from Lake of the Woods and Red Lake schools met on a state forest road to walk into the bear den. We had gone through a similar process last year when the collar was initially put on the bear, and now a new group school kids was ready to see an adult bear up-close.

DNR bear researchers Dave Garshelis and Andy Tri are accustomed to many folks looking over their shoulders as they conduct their winter den checks. Typically, Andy and Dave crawl

into the den and anesthetize the bear before children come near the den site. Then, while the bear is unconscious, school kids can watch and ask questions as

Dave and Andy drag the bear out of its den and gather all kinds of data. The data collected helps researchers keep track of the health

of the bear population and ensure that hunting regulations and limits are set appropriately. A lot of the data are mundane and of interest only to bear biologists, other data are interesting to the more casual observer. For instance, GPS locations indicated that this female bear travelled 40 miles southwest in late fall and returned after only a couple weeks to hibernate very near where she hibernated the year before. Why would a bear use so much energy for travel right before hibernation? Presumably, to eat. Acorns have high fat content and can help bears gain weight before winter. There are very few oak trees near where this bear spent the summer, so she travelled 40 miles south where there are lots of oak trees and returned to her home range to hibernate.

Previous DNR research has verified that many bears undertake seasonal migrations just like this bear. Interestingly, the bears travel more frequently and farther distances in years when more food is available, as opposed to when food is scarce. Why would they migrate less when food is scarce? They possibly cannot afford the risk associated with extra travel in a food-scarce year, so the travel is mostly used to benefit health and fitness during good years as opposed to being used to stave off physiological decline and starvation during bad years. *(Bears continued on page 6)*



Friends of Norris Camp

Treasurer's Report

by June Foss

Account Balance = \$7,182.58 on 3/26/2018

Thanks so much to the following people for donations they've made since September 2017:

Beverly Clemons

Given in Memory of Grant Coyer

and

Dan Moss, Jeff Moss, Joe Aberwald,

Gavin Bettcher and Tim Bettcher

Given in Memory of Gary Moss

and

Sandra Klaers

Given in Memory of Tom Klaers



Nongame Wildlife Checkoff

The loon marks the line where you can help preserve Minnesota's wildlife! On your Minnesota's tax form (M-1) or property tax form (M1-PR), look for the line with the loon symbol. Write in the amount of the donation you wish to make.

Black Bear Research & School Groups

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Indeed, after migration, this female was almost 60 pounds heavier than the year before.

In the end, students were able to see a bear up-close while researchers gathered data. Eventually, when the researchers had completed their tasks, they gently slid the bear back into her den and covered the entrance with fir boughs. And the kids got back on the school bus, but hopefully they gained some appreciation for these large animals and their habitats. And if any of these kids are in the woods this summer and they see a bear with bright orange ear tags, they will know that it is not the first time they have met that bruin.

Link to "Bears are pretty cool" video by Brad Dokken from the Grand Forks Herald.
<https://www.grandforksherald.com/sports/outdoors/4414060-bears-are-pretty-cool>

CONTACT

For more INFORMATION

Red Lake WMA Headquarters

11536 Faunce-Butterfield Road SW, PO Box 100

Roosevelt, MN 56673

Phone: (218) 783-6861

redlake.wildlife@state.mn.us



DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES