

More Than Ducks & Deer

State properties offer treasures of wildlife viewing

By Dick Ellis

“If we had been out here in summer it really would have been an experience because the prairie was still in full bloom,” said Invasive Species Coordinator Diane Schauer on the Killsnake Wildlife Area in Calumet County. “But the beauty of these wildlife areas is always fabulous. You never know what to expect and every season is different.”

We were touring the Killsnake and Brillion Wildlife Areas on a September day specifically so that Schauer could let the prairie abundant with wildlife and vegetation “speak” for itself. She didn’t know what species would star on this day. But she was confident that the show would be unique and worth the ticket of admission.

It costs nothing to enter any of the approximate 175 similar wildlife areas across Wisconsin to simply watch and listen. But,

TO FIND WISCONSIN WILDLIFE AREAS

To find State wildlife areas located throughout Wisconsin, Google “Wisconsin Wildlife Areas”. Click on the first listing, “WDNR-State Wildlife Areas.”



Non-poisonous fox snakes that grow to more than four feet in length and other snake species hibernate underground (hibernaculum) on the Brillion Wildlife Area of Calumet County and can be viewed frequently throughout the spring and summer months. (Photo by Ken Koehler)

Schauer stressed, there is so much more to do on the properties collectively totaling almost 600,000 acres in addition to hunting and fishing.

“What a tremendous resource we have for hunters and non-hunters alike,” Schauer said. “Continued public land purchases, supported by great conversationalists... sportsmen and women of Wisconsin... provide a wealth of opportunities for everyone in this state.”

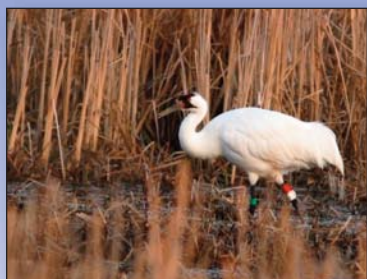
Since 1876, the state of Wisconsin has been acquiring land to

meet conservation and recreation needs. Killsnake and Brillion reflect the thousands of acres throughout Wisconsin where visitors can catch and shoot a limit without ever carrying a rod or gun. The camera and binoculars will do just fine. Schauer carried three binoculars on this trip.

In 1947, the DNR leased portions of the current 5,000 acre Brillion property as a public hunting ground for ducks, deer and other wildlife according to the Google link to “WDNR-Wildlife Areas” which showcases wildlife



TOP: A Northern Harrier is captured posing in the Killsnake Wildlife Area of Calumet County. State areas throughout Wisconsin offer much more for the outdoor enthusiast than hunting and fishing. BOTTOM: An Osprey is about to enjoy a fish dinner in Brillion Wildlife Area in Calumet County. Wildlife watching opportunities abound on state wildlife properties. (Ken Koehler)



Whooping Cranes with banded legs were captured by photographer Ken Koehler at the Brillion Wildlife Area in Calumet County. The first whooping crane ever recorded east of Lake Winnebago was on the Brillion property. (Ken Koehler)



A compass plant flower on the Brillion Wildlife Area in Calumet County. (Diane Schauer)



A Viceroy is captured by the camera on a Blazing Star in the Killsnake Wildlife Area of Calumet County. (Diane Schauer)



A Snowy Owl in the Killsnake Wildlife Area in Calumet County. (Ken Koehler)

areas throughout Wisconsin. The area was known for its high numbers of ducks during the hunting seasons and deer during the winter. By 1962, a formal proposal was made to acquire lands within the current boundary structure.

In 1977, a master plan was adopted by the Natural Resources Board with goals to develop and manage the area for waterfowl production and a broad spectrum of hunting recreation. The plan also provides opportunities for educational and compatible non-hunting recreational activities. Objectives include production of 2,000 ducklings annually and providing adequate food and cover to maintain a wintering herd of 200-300 deer.

Benefits of the project also included providing upland and lowland habitat for a variety of non-game species, providing wetland habitat for 15 to 20 muskrats per acre with an annual harvest of 3,000 to 6,000 muskrats. Other benefit goals include managing upland timber stands and providing for 1000 participant days of non-consumptive use such as wildlife observation, photography, and hiking.

Schauer is most in tune to the latter. She enjoys simply listening and watching on both properties with her husband to enjoy the seasonal and resident wildlife. Her photography adorns many DNR publication and prominent placement on the state website. We drove the properties, walked, photographed, and kept an eye and ear out for visitors to the prairie. She is as intrigued when talking about the squadrons of dragonflies that quickly minimized a horrendous mosquito hatch this summer as she is speaking of her monarchs and viceroys offering photo “oops” on a blossoming and colorful prairie.

Schauer pointed out big blue stem, compass plants, prairie dock, blazing star, purple and white prairie clover and yellow cone flower. We watched and heard too many sandhill cranes to count, various species of hawks and waterfowl, blue herons, and butterflies and insects in a close-up introduction to the prairie as a community. She pointed out farmers in the distance harvesting marsh hay from the properties after a bidding process that sends thousands of dollars back to the state and into those

very same wildlife areas.

“In winter depending on the number of voles, the properties are also visited by Rough-legged hawks and Short-eared owls from Canada,” she said. “We see snowy owls, ospreys, northern harrier hawks, and the first whooping cranes ever spotted east of Lake Winnebago were on the Brillion property. Today we were able to see about a dozen white egrets, which gather here before migrating over winter along coastlines from northern California and New Jersey to the southern coast and throughout South America.”

Non poisonous Fox snakes, she said, also over-winter underground, or in “hibernaculum” on the Brillion Wildlife Area and are often observed, some to four feet or larger, during the spring and summer months.”

The Killsnake Wildlife Area is located in both southeastern Calumet and southwestern Manitowoc Counties. The landscape consists of prairie grasslands, uplands with large wetland-grassland complex, bottomland hardwood forest, a small area of cedar swamp, a small area of tamarack and bog,

agricultural landscape, small areas of upland forest and over 50 small wetland restorations. The south branch of the Manitowoc River, Cedar Creek and the Killsnake River run through both properties

In 1948, the Killsnake Bottoms and Cedar Creek Area, which occupied about 4500 acres within the present boundary of about 7000 acres, were set up as leased areas. The first land was purchased in 1956 in Manitowoc County and in the mid-1960s the property was expanded into Calumet County. Farming occurs on over 1,000 acres involving agriculture crops. Restorations of prairie on more than 1500 acres along with small wetlands totaling over 50 sites continue to add to the diversity of this property.

“These wildlife areas across Wisconsin offer so much more than deer and ducks,” Schauer said. “We have a tremendous amount of wildlife beyond the typical birds and animals pursued by hunters. They’re here for everyone who enjoys the outdoors. There are beautiful things to see. And you never know what’s going to be around the next bend in the trail.” ^{OWO}