
Volunteer Activities of the Emiquon Audubon Society and Other Audubon Chapters Along the Illinois River

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ABSTRACT

The Emiquon Audubon Society (EAS) was formed by a small group of individuals in 1999 in order to promote appreciation and understanding of nature and to support the conservation of natural resources. A special emphasis has been on the Illinois River and its floodplain. Within a few years, the group's membership was nearing 100, and EAS had been accepted as a chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society (IAS) and as a Friends Group of the National Wildlife Refuge Association. EAS has secured several outside grants to support educational outreach and for projects involving tree planting and natural landscaping with prairie plants. Volunteer activities have included periodic bird surveys at Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Chautauqua NWR, tree planting, and assisting refuge staff at public events such as International Migratory Bird Day. EAS has organized a special Volunteer Stewardship Committee to help recruit more volunteers and organize activities.

There are at least four other Audubon chapters that have made significant volunteer contributions toward conservation along the Illinois River. The Starved Rock Audubon Society (an IAS chapter) has been highly involved with management and protection of IAS's Plum Island Wildlife Sanctuary, just opposite Starved Rock State Park. The Peoria Audubon Society (a chapter of the National Audubon Society and an IAS affiliate) took the lead in organizing systematic bird counts of upper and lower Peoria lakes; their members also conduct bald eagle counts, and participate in spring and Christmas bird counts in Fulton, Mason, Peoria, Tazewell, and Woodford counties. The Morgan County Chapter of IAS maintains a bird count project at Meredosia NWR. Members of the Great Rivers Chapter of IAS have helped at Two Rivers NWR, located at the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, with bird counts, habitat restoration, staffing the visitor's center on the weekends, and yearly clean-up activities at the Portage Island Division (just beyond the mouth of the Illinois River).

Audubon societies have had a long history of helping to protect and manage this nation's natural resources, particularly its national wildlife refuges. This tradition has continued along the Illinois River, in no small measure due to the prominence of its several national wildlife refuges.

FORMING A LOCAL AUDUBON CHAPTER

The area near Havana, Illinois, along the Illinois River, is perhaps a bit unusual due to the close proximity of several facilities from both state and federal agencies: the Forbes Biological Station and Illinois River Biological Station (Illinois Natural History Survey), Havana field office of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, field headquarters for the Illinois River National Wildlife and Fish Refuges, and Dickson Mounds Museum are all located within five miles. The area also supports a higher density of dedicated Illinois Nature Preserves and other public lands than surrounding counties. Recognizing this concentration of natural resource interests, in 1998 a small circle of friends with an interest in nature began the process of forming a local Audubon group,

which they hoped would provide an avenue by which field trips and nature-related programs could be offered. Although the group's focus would tend to be on birds, as one would expect from an Audubon group, they also planned to place a special emphasis on natural history along the Illinois River valley. And the group hoped to offer volunteer opportunities to members, beyond running the organization, as the need would arise.

The "Emiquon Audubon Society" (EAS) was chosen as the name for the group to honor the nearby Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge. The organizers felt that this was an appropriate name given the fact that the Audubon group and the national wildlife refuge were both in their formative stages (the first tract of the Emiquon Refuge was acquired in 1993). The mission of EAS was chosen as follows: "to promote the appreciation and understanding of nature and to support the conservation of natural resources." By the end of 1999, EAS had over 90 members and had met the criteria to be accepted as an official chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society (IAS). IAS was organized in 1897 to help stop the destruction of birds for the feather trade. IAS is a statewide conservation organization with 19 chapters and 13 affiliate groups. IAS chapter recognition helped establish EAS as a credible organization within a very short time, enabling the group to seek more ambitious goals than otherwise would have been possible. A frequently updated web site (<http://sciencespot.net/eas/>) and bi-monthly newsletter have helped to improve outreach and keep members informed of recent activities.

FURTHER ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

Although EAS's first year was very active with frequent field trips and membership meetings designed to increase the group's visibility and membership, there seemed to be an overall lack of direction and an unclear vision of what the group hoped to accomplish over the long term. But about midway through this first year, EAS leaders became aware of the National Audubon Society's Audubon Refuge Keeper (ARK) program, which was designed to increase the involvement of local Audubon groups with their nearby national wildlife refuges. The ARK program encouraged Audubon members to volunteer on refuges and to apply for grants through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) for conservation and educational projects carried out on national wildlife refuges. (There are currently 544 national wildlife refuges, with at least one in each state [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2005a.]) Through the ARK program, EAS had found its focus, which was highly welcomed by the managers at the Illinois River Refuges (Chautauqua, Cameron-Billsbach, Emiquon, Meredosia) headquarters in Havana. The partnership between Audubon chapters and the National Wildlife Refuge System, in fact, has a long history, going back to the beginning of the System itself (Dolin 2003). ARK helped remind everyone of this fact.

The ARK program, however, was not set up to be a permanent program. But the Audubon groups and partnerships which were established in the ARK program easily fit into the Friends Group program being led by the National Wildlife Refuge Association. Eventually, EAS became officially recognized as a Friends Group of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, strengthening the Audubon-national wildlife refuge partnership even further. While assisting refuge staff during yearly media events, such as the International Migratory Bird Day and National Wildlife Refuge Week open houses at Chautauqua Refuge, EAS has been given the opportunity to maintain a higher visibility than would otherwise be the case. The establishment of more Friends Groups, indeed, has been a nationwide trend; in 2004, there was a six percent increase in the number of Friends Groups, bringing the nationwide total to 246 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2005b).

OBTAINING GRANTS

By only its second year of existence, EAS had been awarded its first NFWF grant for an outreach project that included baseline photographic monitoring, construction of a promotional display board for special events, and the design and distribution of a field guide to local natural areas entitled "A Nature Field Guide to the Illinois

River Valley at Chautauqua and Emiquon National Wildlife Refuges.” Copies of this guide have since been distributed to libraries, museums, and nature centers throughout Illinois and to all IAS members.

Subsequent NFWF grants provided funds for EAS to purchase several pieces of high quality optical equipment (4 binoculars and 2 spotting scopes), which have been placed on permanent loan to the Illinois River Refuges for use by the general public and refuge staff; and for materials to build an informational kiosk at Emiquon Refuge. In 2002, the National Tree Trust provided EAS with 2,000 trees, which were planted by volunteers at Chautauqua, Emiquon, and Meredosia refuges. The use of volunteers was a requirement of this grant.

But the challenges of recruiting and organizing volunteers suggested the need for a more systematic approach. So EAS soon formed a Volunteer Stewardship Committee. Although EAS has been a totally volunteer organization from its inception, most EAS members, beyond the core group managing the organization, only occasionally participated in organized volunteer activities. And it was felt that the field trips and programs at membership meetings were appreciated more for their entertainment value than as being part of accomplishing substantive conservation goals—although their educational value must not be underestimated. The National Tree Trust planting was different. And it was this type of activity—on-the-ground conservation using volunteers—that the EAS leadership felt the organization should further emphasize.

INCREASING VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

All activities not connected with the normal operation of EAS are considered to fall under the supervision of the EAS Volunteer Stewardship Committee. It is the committee’s task to track, organize, and evaluate volunteer activities on a regular basis. Such activities have included tree planting at Emiquon Refuge, birdhouse-building workshops at Dickson Mounds Museum, and periodic bird surveys at Chautauqua and Emiquon refuges. The Chautauqua Refuge bird survey, which focuses on waterbirds and their associates, is conducted weekly (by Richard and Sig Bjorklund) from the refuge’s levee system. It should be noted, however, that this survey was being conducted prior to the formation of EAS. The Emiquon Refuge bird survey, which focuses on floodplain forest species, is conducted monthly (by T.V. Lerczak), except during the main songbird breeding season where point counts are conducted weekly for three weeks. Both counts are providing refuge managers with timely and important information. Results from the bird surveys are periodically posted on the Illinois River Refuges web site (<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/IllinoisRiver/>). In addition, data from the Chautauqua Refuge counts have been analyzed by professional biologists at the Forbes Biological Station (Horath et al. 2002). Data collected on the Emiquon count are being entered into the eBird database (<http://www.ebird.org/content/>) that is supported by Cornell University and the National Audubon Society, which is accessible to anyone; these data have been used by birders as well as scientists to analyze bird distributions across North American.

But the Emiquon Refuge count is part of a more direct contribution to conservation. The volunteer hours contributed on the Emiquon count are being used as part of an in-kind match for a portion of a \$1 million land acquisition grant (North American Wetlands Conservation Act [NAWCA]) for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to purchase lands within the approved 11,122-acre Emiquon Refuge acquisition boundary. As of this writing, only about 19 percent of the area within the acquisition boundary has been purchased by the federal government, prior to the NAWCA grant. The rest is still in private ownership.

In a typical year, the National Wildlife Refuge System accommodates roughly 36,000 volunteers, who provide over 1.4 million volunteer hours, contributing to over 20 percent of the work conducted on refuges (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2005b). The National Wildlife Refuge Association considers volunteers the key to properly managing our national wildlife refuges (National Wildlife Refuge Association 2005). And the National Audubon Society, with reference to conservation issues, states that “People are not the problem; they are the solution...” (Seideman 2004:74). Adams (2003) stated that “Volunteers have become one of the greatest assets to

refuges for accomplishing projects for which there is inadequate funding and staffing.” However, establishing continuity of adult participation in volunteer activities continues to be a challenge. EAS will continue efforts with its Volunteer Stewardship Committee to support conservation at the Illinois River Refuges. Indeed, one day it is hoped that EAS volunteer activities can be expanded onto nearby Illinois Nature Preserves and Land and Water Reserves.

INCREASING PARTNERSHIPS AND VISIBILITY

In reviewing EAS’s activities over the last several years, it is clear that partnerships were important in developing credibility, establishing useful connections, and increasing visibility and name recognition. Partnerships will continue to be important.

In 2004, Dickson Mounds Museum asked EAS to contribute information for an upcoming special exhibit called “Sky Dance: A Look at the Migratory Waterbirds of Illinois.” EAS was also invited to schedule its river-related field trips and programs around the museum’s “A River’s Course” initiative, a five-year program of events highlighting life along the Illinois River. With this in mind, EAS sponsored field trips in 2005 to Anderson Lake State Fish and Wildlife Area and Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge. And in January 2005, EAS’s president presented at the museum a well-attended lecture (over 150 audience members) entitled “A Birding Chronicle of the Illinois River Valley.” EAS also helped the museum to plan a special event on May 14, 2005, celebrating the Illinois River valley’s nine Important Bird Areas. (The Important Bird Areas program in Illinois is being coordinated by Audubon-Chicago Region, which is part of the National Audubon Society.)

The Dickson Mounds Museum collaboration has resulted in greater visibility for EAS and increased membership. EAS will continue to support Dickson Mounds Museum and its initiative “A River’s Course: Life on the Illinois River.”

OTHER AUDUBON CHAPTERS ALONG THE ILLINOIS RIVER VALLEY

There are at least four Audubon chapters, other than EAS, that have made significant volunteer contributions toward conservation of the Illinois River. Other organizations, of course, have been active in conservation along the Illinois River. But this survey only considers the Audubon groups.

The Starved Rock Audubon Society (an IAS chapter) has been highly involved with management and protection of IAS’s 55-acre Plum Island Wildlife Sanctuary, just opposite Starved Rock State Park. Portions of this site were proposed to become an upscale resort development, which would not have been compatible with the state park or use of the island by sensitive species such as overwintering bald eagles. Acquisition of Plum Island by IAS in 2004 is a highly significant conservation victory. Volunteers have contributed a great deal toward stewardship of IAS’s Plum Island Wildlife Sanctuary (Cade 2004). The Peoria Audubon Society (a chapter of the National Audubon Society and an IAS affiliate) has taken the lead in organizing systematic bird counts of upper and lower Peoria lakes; their members also conduct bald eagle counts, and participate in spring and Christmas bird counts in Fulton, Mason, Peoria, Tazewell, and Woodford counties. Results of their counts can be viewed on their web site (<http://peoriaaudubon.org/>). The Morgan County Chapter of IAS maintains a bird count project at Meredosia National Wildlife Refuge (conducted by Tony Ward), and this data can be viewed on the Illinois River Refuges web site. Members of the Great Rivers Chapter of IAS have helped refuge staff at Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge, located at the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, with bird counts, habitat restoration, staffing the visitor’s center on the weekends, and yearly clean-up activities at the Portage Island Division (just beyond the mouth of the Illinois River).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Wildlife Refuge System and Audubon societies with a pool of volunteers have traditionally been a natural fit. And this is certainly true along the Illinois River valley. The Illinois River Refuges, in fact, provided a needed focus for the fledgling Emiquon Audubon Society. Without such a focus, it is uncertain whether or not the group would have been able to grow in such an organized manner. Both the Illinois River Refuges and EAS have benefitted from this partnership.

Agencies that mentor volunteer groups can help foster better partnerships by identifying projects that volunteers can complete without special licensing. Such activities include photography, writing articles, leading field trips, helping with visitors on special events, vegetation planting, gathering trash, maintaining trails, and general site monitoring. Brainstorming sessions between agency staff and volunteer committee leaders should be regularly scheduled to keep the volunteers engaged and to identify new areas where volunteers may contribute their time and expertise. If the volunteers express an interest in helping on more advanced activities, the agency should consider offering special certification training (e.g., herbicide use) so that volunteers can be better utilized.

Finally, to avoid burnout, volunteers must feel that their contributions are important. Agencies should frequently show how the volunteers' contributions have made a difference, and the agencies should hold special banquets and offer a variety of small gifts (e.g., pins) or certificates to volunteers as tokens of appreciation. And new volunteers should continually be recruited. cursory glances at volunteer groups tend to show that a majority of the members are older middle-aged or well beyond the normal retirement age. So a question frequently arises as to why younger adults rarely seem to volunteer. One might suggest increasing outreach to colleges and universities to address this situation. But even if this were tried, more information on trends in the volunteering rates of young and middle-aged adults, and what motivates them, is certainly needed.

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