

The Refuge is looking for a Few Good Volunteer Monitors

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Staff of the Tualatin River NWR collect and analyze a variety of data on habitat condition and wildlife use of the refuge each year. As environmental and social changes accelerate, this monitoring effort is increasingly more vital for gauging the health of area wildlife populations and habitat. The types and frequency of survey work has increased in recent years putting stress on Refuge staff time commitments, but creating opportunities for volunteers.

The Refuge is also contributing to knowledge needed to answer bigger questions. It will provide valuable insight on several emerging regional and national issues:

1. How will species respond to the significant habitat improvement efforts being made on refuge lands?
2. How is local wildlife being affected by climate change?
3. What can we say about population trends, especially sensitive or endangered species?
4. How will increasing urbanization and intensifying agricultural operations around the refuge effect species using the refuge?

As monitoring programs grow and become more sophisticated on the Refuge a need has been recognized to seek additional volunteer assistance to collect needed information. Most surveys are conducted by small groups or individuals and respect the need for flexibility in individual schedules.

Several types of surveys are conducted. These surveys use standardized methods to insure comparability of data from one year to the next and also among other National Wildlife Refuges:

1. Shorebird Surveys. This monitoring effort focuses on counting individual species of shorebirds present on the Refuge. It's done once a week from April through September. Each survey day usually starts at 8:00 and concludes by noon.
2. Marsh bird Call Back Surveys. This monitoring effort is conducted from April through June when target species are vocalizing most actively around nesting season. A series of pre-established monitoring stations are visited and a ten-minute recording of marsh bird calls is played and audible responses to the recorded calls are recorded. Any sightings of the birds – American bitterns, Virginia rail, sora, pied-billed grebe, and American coot are recorded. These surveys usually start at 6 or 7 and must conclude by 10:00.
3. Winter Waterfowl Surveys. Observations of species and estimated numbers are recorded weekly or more frequently from October to February. Surveys run from dawn, about 7am until about 10 am.
4. Point Count Surveys. During spring and early summer months when song birds are most vocal a pre-established set of stations are monitored and species are recorded by song and less reliably, by sight. Surveys begin at 7:00 or earlier and conclude by 10:00.
5. Mist Net Surveys. These surveys start EARLY – at 5 or 5:30am and run till noon. They are run from May through August during breeding season. Six stations on a one mile loop trail are set up with mist nets. The loop is walked continuously during survey periods to remove trapped birds which are immediately weighed, measured, banded, and then released. Birds as small as hummingbirds and as large as scrub jays and downy woodpeckers have been caught.
6. Vegetation Surveys. These generally begin in August and some run into September and early October. These can be done any time of day. Vegetation transects are completed to determine species and composition of plants in wetlands and uplands. Tree and shrub survival plots are permanently located in restoration areas where each plant is identified and measured for growth. Some plant identification skills are helpful here, but data recorders are always welcome.
7. Herbarium Collection. Volunteer Ginny Maffitt has established an incredible plant collection and there is always something new and exciting to add or to add photographs to go along with the plant list.
8. Data Entry. There is always a great need for entering all these data into the computer!

9. Special Projects. Special projects that come up from time to time: These may occur at any time of year and may include planting projects or plant maintenance. Other activities include setting up survey routes and test plots. These typically only require a set of helping hands and enjoyment of the refuge!

What skills are needed?

1. The ability to recognize birds by sight and song in various situations is very important, but apprentices are always welcome. With most of these surveys a collaborative effort works best which allows team members of different skill levels to participate.
2. Reliability is important. To be of greatest value volunteers should commit to participating at least a few days of the survey schedule.
3. Weather can vary but may be cold and wet. Some surveys are conducted independent of weather while other surveys are weather dependent.
4. Volunteers should have their own binoculars, but a couple sets are available for check-out. A bird guide is also useful.

The Rewards.

1. These monitoring efforts offer volunteers the opportunity to assist in gathering data important for conserving wildlife and wildlife habitat.
2. Many mornings on the refuge are absolutely magical! The memories from survey trips are often durable and long lasting.
3. Portions of these surveys are in areas of the refuge that are not open to the public –the volunteer has the opportunity to observe birdlife and habitat in some very choice areas.
4. This monitoring work allows for an incredible educational opportunity. Birding skills, bird biology, and habitat botany...
5. Camaraderie. Great opportunity to meet new folks with like interests.