MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge celebrates 50 years of conservation 01M3A971RKEB78CFTBC2WXVB0X

NINA MOINI: Nearly 70 miles along the Minnesota River, from Bloomington to Henderson, sits more than 15,000 acres of preserved water and land. It's known as the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. And this weekend, it's celebrating 50 years of habitat conservation and restoration.

Joining me now is the manager of the refuge, Sonja Jahrsdoerfer. Thanks so much for being with us, Sonja.

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: Hi, Nina. You're welcome. Thanks for your interest.

NINA MOINI: Well, this is really an iconic scene to drive past. I grew up in Apple Valley in the South Metro, so tons of times, driving along and driving North there on a Cedar Avenue and looking around and watching it change over the years, as somebody who's from here. It's such a beautiful-- a treasure, really. I'm wondering, seeing these beautiful natural areas from the road, people may not realize that it's even part of protected land. So could you describe the habitat and the wildlife that people may see in this area, and then why is it protected?

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: Sure. Well, we were established 50 years ago because a group of local concerned citizens knew these areas were at risk of being developed for industrial or commercial development, and they thought it was important that they be protected so that people could still access them for outdoor recreation. So we have protected a wide range of habitats within the refuge boundaries, including the Minnesota River itself and oak savanna areas, native prairies, wetlands and streams, and just other native habitats that occur in this part of Minnesota.

And we work to protect them, but also to enhance them, because in many cases, they've got invasive species that have choked out the native plants. And so we work on habitat restoration projects to improve them for wildlife.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and I think, sometimes, people wonder, they're driving by and they're like, what would this be like if it were, industrialization, commercialization was going on? And what do you think it would look like in the area if these lands hadn't been protected? Do you ever think about that?

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: We're just grateful that we were able to have the land protected 50 years ago. Obviously, if it hadn't been set aside as a National Wildlife Refuge, it likely would have a lot more development than it has right now. It would look like some areas of the Minnesota River Corridor, where there are other developments in place. But we are really fortunate that someone had the vision 50 years ago to protect this land, that they were able to get support to do that.

And the other part of it that is really exciting is that even then, 50 years ago, they realized that the people were an equally important part of the refuge, not just the habitat. And so, it says in our authorizing legislation that we are also here for providing environmental education and outreach activities to benefit hundreds of thousands of Twin Cities residents, is what it said back then.

And of course, it's even more people now. But it's a visionary thing that people realized even back then, that it's not enough to protect the wildlife and habitats. We also have to think about people's role in the area, and how we can benefit people and help get them interested in conservation and outdoor recreation.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. I wonder, too, what it takes to manage 15,000 acres of land. I was just kind of googling, trying to describe for our audience. And I read that that's roughly the size of Manhattan.

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: It's a big area. And we were actually out on some site visits this morning, and we realized, as we drove across some bridges, across the river, and just across along some wetland areas, that a lot of what we were seeing was actually National Wildlife Refuge land. And probably, a lot of people in this area aren't even aware that the reason that land is still in its natural state is because it was protected as part of this refuge.

And I will say, it keeps us busy, managing that much land. And the other thing that makes it a little bit more challenging is that the refuge is not in one contiguous piece of land. We are in multiple units and parcels, along, you mentioned, the 70 miles of the river. And we're in 14 counties so lots of different access points, lots of different types of habitats, and lots of different issues.

And so it is a very challenging place to implement conservation, and it's also a very rewarding place to implement conservation because through our partnerships that we have with many local entities and organizations, we've really been able to do some great work here. And we are just grateful that we have so many people that work with us on these issues, because we can do much more in our partnerships than if we tried to do it all by ourselves.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Let's talk about Saturday, the 50th anniversary celebration. I'm sure tons of people that you're talking about who've helped along this journey of 50 years will be there, but what can people expect? How can they take part?

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: Sure. We have several different activities that people can join in that day. We'll have some arts and crafts activities. We have some of our heavy equipment that will be on site, and then people will have a chance to look at some of these large machines up close, if they haven't ever been able to see that before.

We'll have archery. People can learn how to do that with, what we call, stick-it archery. It's kind of a Velcro system, instead of the actual archery, which I'll just mention, that we do offer regular archery sessions as well, and teach people how to do that activity.

So, we'll have food trucks. We'll have some of the previous refuge managers, who used to work here, will be talking about the history of the refuge and their experiences here in this area.

And we'll also have the results of the Find Your Wild Art Contest, which we developed for this event, in particular. And we opened it up over the last few months. And the winners of the contest were recently selected, and their art pieces will be hanging in our gallery in the visitor center in Bloomington. And we will also be awarding the different awards to the people who created those pieces of art.

NINA MOINI: Cool. Say, Sonja, for folks who can't come out, maybe, this weekend on Saturday for the 50th anniversary celebration, but they now want to consciously go and see areas of the refuge, you mentioned, it's vast, and it's in different areas. You're probably the person to ask, is there somewhere that is a can't miss or a really great spot that you would recommend that people check out? Like, is there other kinds of programming that people can participate in?

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: So our visitor center in Bloomington has a lot of different activities, and we're open here Wednesday through Sunday from 10:00 to 5:00. And we have indoor activities, if it happens to be a rainy day. We've got some kid-friendly exhibits that we've put together and some opportunities for them to actually learn more about nature through doing some things like practicing getting in and out of a kayak and practicing putting on a PFD.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: And we offer lots of different free activities. One thing I wanted to mention is that everything we do here is always free. So people, if they sign up for any of activities, either a bird walk, or an archery activity, or using our snowshoes that we have in the winter, it's always free. So we are committed to being a community asset by providing these resources for people.

And so they could either just come to the visitor center anytime between 10:00 and 5:00 from Wednesday through Sunday, and look at the different exhibits we have and the activities we have, or they can sign up for different activities on our website.

And our trails are always open. So they're open every day from sunrise to sunset. And we have about 50 miles of trails throughout the refuge, and people can hike those whenever they choose.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. Sonja, thank you so much for filling us in about all this. We really appreciate it. Congrats on 50 years.

SONJA JAHRSDOERFER: Thank you Sonja Jahrsdoerfer is the refuge manager of the Minnesota Valley Wildlife Refuge.