



The REDHEAD



Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery

Summer 2012

A Special Committee of the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis

Vol. 6 No. 3

RHWO NEWS

Jim Howitz reports that as of August 1st, there are six red-headed woodpecker nests still active at Cedar Creek Eco Science Reserve. The banding team has banded 56 total birds, 50 adults and six nestlings before banding was suspended on June 26th. Thirty-two males and eighteen females have been banded. Because the more recent birds have been caught in pairs, only one of each pair has had a feather sample sent for DNA determination of sex. The remaining bird has to be the opposite sex. So far there have been no disagreements in what the DNA analysis tells us the sex of an individual is and what we see in the field.

Three birds have been found dead along Anoka County Road 26, two of them banded. Jim knows of one and probably two more birds that disappeared during the breeding season and likely died.

Fledging success currently is about 72%. That is, 72% of all pairs have fledged at least one baby. That percent is likely to increase a bit because two pairs are attempting replacement nests. Four pairs are attempting second broods.

Small sample sizes preclude any definitive statements, but nests located higher appear more likely to succeed than lower nests, and males nesting for the first time appear less successful than older males.

It is likely that nests were overlooked in past years and the population underestimated. Jim's best estimate for 2012 is 120 birds. Only 42 nests were found in 2011, requiring 84 birds. This year four pairs nested along the west side of East Bethel Boulevard. The burning regimen has apparently opened up enough of the woods there and killed and weakened enough trees so that the habitat now is attractive to the woodpeckers.

The most curious result found is how seldom the adults feed the fledglings.

The final results for this breeding season should be completed by the end of August.

The Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery thanks Jim Howitz, Lead Bander, Ron Refsnider, Lance Nelson and Paige Dempsey for their outstanding work on the banding team.

A Note from the Chair

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July 2012

With survey work wrapping up at Cedar Creek, we have begun to focus more on outreach to public and private landowners that have expressed an interest in creating or expanding RHWO habitat. Earlier this month, nine of us visited the Belwin Conservancy near Afton, MN. For years Belwin has been a pioneer in preserving habitat and in providing outdoor education to students in the St. Paul schools... with over 10,000 students visiting Belwin's prairie/savanna/wetland habitat. Presently Belwin is creating over 200 acres of oak savanna, with hopes of attracting RHWO. We toured the Conservancy with Tara Kelly, Belwin's director of ecological restoration and got a good overview of their total 1400 acres of protected habitat. We not only survived a Bataan 'death march' (anyone remember Bataan?) through near-100° heat, but also enjoyed an open buggy-ride to exchange pleasantries with Belwin's herd of 28 pure bred (i.e. real) buffalo (bison).

This summer we will do some door-knocking and visiting with private residents who live right across the road from Cedar Creek along Durant St.... just so they understand who those weird folks are they always see stamping around the Cedar Creek savanna. We will also be spending more time working with staff at Carlos Avery, Sherburne, and the MNRV National Wildlife Refuges and private landowners where we have found groups of RHWO.

As always we appreciate your support and work for the cause of our dear RHWO friends. Speaking of which - if Jerry hasn't already reminded you - it's time to renew your membership in Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery's efforts.

Chet Meyers, Chair

Factoid: The most important, and at the same time the most variable factor in savanna heterogeneity are the savanna trees. Because of the tree (oak) canopy, available light varies widely across the savanna. Much depends upon how close to the tree an understory plant is growing, and the size and shape of the canopy. The north side of a tree may be in relative shade while the south side of the same tree may be sunny.

<http://oaksavannas.org/savanna-ecology.html>

Note From the Editor

What is a savanna? That is the question explored in this issue. Norma Rudesill was kind enough to send me her thoughts and I took advantage of her effort by publishing them. I think you will find them interesting if not remindful of your roots.

The major article explores the extended definition of a savanna and how they fit into the red-headed woodpecker (RHWO) world. The concept that telephone poles in a prairie has an important element of a savanna for the RHWO was intriguing to me.

The banding news from Cedar Creek is very interesting. Now that we have shown that they can be banded with some effort, we are hopeful of getting a full fledged research project going at Cedar Creek. How can a potential doctoral student pass up 50 banded birds to begin their study?

Finally my usual appeal for an article about red-headed woodpeckers or their habitat. They help the process of creating this newsletter tremendously. I want to thank Norma Rudesill for her article. Also please keep the photos coming. You may see yours in "The REDHEAD" next time.

Jerry Bahls, Editor



Photo by Larry Wannebo

What is a savanna?

The classic definition of a savanna is an island of trees in the middle of a grassland. There is often the connotation of shade and refuge among the trees. Here in Wisconsin, we no longer have acres of grasslands, except in some state and federal wildlife areas.

Yet in the past year, I saw more red-headed woodpeckers than I did during the previous ten years.

I was doing a bird survey for a proposed wind farm site in an agricultural area. In this part of St. Croix County, it is a common practice to use small woodlots to pasture dairy heifers or beef cows. Generally the woodlots were on unutilized land. The cattle kept small trees from growing and the result is an open woods (often oaks) with large older trees that provided nesting cavities. Most of the woodlots were two to five acres in size.

So here we have our "modern" savanna of an island of trees in the middle of grassland. Only the "grass" is corn, alfalfa and soybeans.

When I was young, we always had red-headed woodpeckers nesting in our woods. My father also grazed the woods quite heavily so it was more open than it is now. The red-headed woodpecker decline started before we stopped grazing the woods. I still occasionally see one there, but I have had no proof of nesting for eight years or so.

Norma Rudesill
Baldwin, WI



Photo by Jerry Bahls

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Savannas

What is a savanna? Haney and Apfelbaum¹ defines it as being “characterized by scattered trees, largely comprised of oaks, and a sparse ground layer rich in grasses and forbs”. Nuzzo² defines oak savannas as plant communities “...dominated by oaks having between 10 and 80 percent canopy, with or without a shrub layer, and herbaceous cover, predominately a grassy layer, composed of both prairie and forest communities...”³ Curtis⁴ defines it as a plant community where trees are a component but where their density is “...so low that it allows grasses and other herbaceous vegetation to become the actual dominants of the community.” On the website www.oaksavanna.org, it has a more rigorous definition - “Savannas are often defined in terms of the openness of the tree canopy. Thus, the upper limit between savanna and forest is generally considered to be a tree canopy with 50% coverage. Therefore, if more than one-half of the ground area is in the sun at noon in midsummer, the vegetation is classed as a savanna. If the canopy has greater than 50% tree canopy coverage, the vegetation is called a woodland or forest. The lower canopy coverage, between savanna and prairie, is generally considered to be 10% tree coverage, although these upper and lower limits are only approximate.”

It is generally agreed that less than 1% of the pre-settlement oak savannas remain in Minnesota. While some effort is being made to restore these savannas, almost no natural processes are working to restore these savannas without human intervention. Fire historically has been the principle method for restoring savannas and very few occur today without human interference. Wind storms can be of assistance, but have little influence without fire assisting. Bison grazing helped maintain savannas, but did little to restore them. Beaver ponds may have been instrumental in establishing some savannas, but their long term health probably degraded rapidly.



Photo by Jerry Bahls

Nature Centers, military reserves and natural park lands often have maintained small savanna areas in them. These are the jewels of savannas because they are actively maintained. Depending upon the size and location snag retention can be an issue. Probably the crown jewels of this category are Cedar Creek Eco Science Reserve and Necedah National Refuge. Camp Riply is an excellent example of military reserves.



Photo by Larry Wannebo

There are a few human influenced methods of producing savanna-like landscapes. With the European settlement the introduction of domestic animals, especially the cow, produced one these landscapes - the pasture. The grazing and over-grazing of wood lots kept the understory short and encouraged growth of grasses and forbs. These “savannas” have been places where red-headed woodpeckers have been known to nest (See article this issue). The changes in modern agriculture where the “pasture” is brought to the cow has been the demise of this “savanna”, which has reduced the number potential nesting sites.

Another human produced “savanna” is the golf course. The fairways with their short and long grasses lined with trees mimics the natural savanna. Minnesota has 575 golf courses. Several of these have red-headed woodpeckers on them and a couple have been designated as clusters by the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery. The promotion of

snags is the main focus at this time.

Another fairly good human produced “savanna” is the placement of wooden telephone and power poles in prairie and agricultural areas. Red-headed woodpeckers as well as other woodpeckers extensively used these “trees” for nesting. Especially in the period from about 1920 - 1950. The introduction of creosote and now more effective preservatives especially the injected preservatives that are injected into the pole has been a real concern. See the Winter 2010 edition of “The REDHEAD” for a discussion of the problem.

To a lesser extent the following two human produced “savannas” have little or no impact on red-headed woodpeckers. They are the recreation parks with their baseball, football and soccer fields. There are often trees in the vicinity of these parks. However few snags are allowed to remain in the vicinity due to personal injury and property damage issues. The

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wooden light poles have been largely replaced by metal poles and structures.

Finally, towns and cities have some elements of a savanna. However these elements are very diverse. What is missing almost exclusively is the snag. They are considered to be too dangerous or not esthetically pleasing to be retained.

1. **Haney, Alan; Apfelbaum, Steven I.** 1990. Structure and dynamics of midwest oak savannas. In: *Sweeney, James S., ed. Management of dynamic ecosystems, proceedings of the symposium*; 1989 December 5; Springfield, IL. West Lafayette, IN: North Central Section, The Wildlife Society: 19-30.)
2. **Nuzzo, Victoria A.** 1986. Extent and status of midwest oak savanna: presettlement and 1985. *Natural Areas Journal*. 6(2):6- 36.
3. The previous two references were used as shown from Jay R. Law, USDA Forest Service (retired), Paul S. Johnson, Principal Silviculturist and Garry Houf, Forest Biologist, Mark Twain National Forest; "A Crown Cover Chart For Oak Savannas", March, 1994, TB-NC-2.
4. **Curtis, John T.** 1959. *The Vegetation of Wisconsin*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.

Fall Issue Feature Topic

The Fall issue's topic will be "How does modern Agriculture affect the Red-headed Woodpecker?" Send your observations and references to Jerry Bahls (rhwracm@comcast.net) by October 15th. Also send any future topics to be featured in the newsletter.

Next RhWR Meetings

The RhWR meets on the 3rd Wednesday each month at 7:00 pm at the Lund's Store 1 block west of 50th & France in Edina. The next meeting will be **August 15th**. All are welcome and encouraged to attend. Please encourage your friends to attend also. Check our website (www.RedheadRecovery.org) for current information.

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Save that Snag!

Place
Stamp
Here



Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery Program Membership Application

- I'd like to join!* Please add me as a member of the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery (RhWR) at the rate of \$10/year! Please send my membership information to the address below.
- I'd like to renew!* Renew my RhWR membership for \$5/year.
- Yes, I'd like to join Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis also!* Please add me as a member of the Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery (\$10) and the Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis (\$12) at the rate of \$22/year. Please send my membership information and *Kingfisher* to the address below.

NAME _____

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CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

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Send this application and make check payable to:
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