

[From Winter 1996-97]

A Tribute to Sherm

By the time this article appears in the Pipino Plover, Sherman Stairs will have retired from the position of Refuge Manager of the Eastern Shore of Virginia and Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuges. Sherm devoted either 37 or 38 years, or at least a very long time, to the Fish and Wildlife Service and will be remembered for his many accomplishments, as a friend, and as the Man who Persevered.

Sherm began his career in fisheries, and I assume had intentions of eventually retiring in that field. Unfortunately, working on fish hatcheries has been a job of uncertainty for many years. Hatcheries, unlike refuges, do not have strong, well-organized support and legislation to protect them; therefore, they are viewed as the Service's stepchild, are subject to closures in times of funding crises, and to take-over by the states. After having the unenviable task of closing several hatcheries he managed, Sherm found the National Wildlife Refuge System as a safer haven.

A Hatchery Manager on a national wildlife refuge! Could it work? In the early 1980s, Sherm was stationed at both the Dismal Swamp NWR and the Back Bay NWR and even had a detail on the Chincoteague Refuge. But Sherm's fame in the refuge system came as the first manager of the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. Starting a refuge is no easy task, even for a veteran of the refuge system. At an age when most are hanging up their badges, Sherm attended the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia. He also attended the Refuge Academy, as one of the most "well-seasoned" enrollees - already having more years in the Service than many of his classmates had in their lives. Sherm was probably viewed as both crazy and very dedicated. I'm sure he imparted much wisdom to both of these groups.

The Eastern Shore of Virginia Refuge was to become a training center for the Service. Unfortunately, politics again began to play a role in Sherm's future, as a major training center was planned in West Virginia, of all places. Sherm, probably thinking that he was back on a hatchery, began to turn "his" refuge into something else. Using a capable staff and help from other refuges, the old buildings on the refuge began to fall: wildlife habitat was created in places where cement and asphalt once covered the ground; wetland habitat was created in seemingly impossible places; and the lands were managed to provide a valuable habitat for woodcock and other wildlife. Sherm established partnerships with the local community and with several non-governmental organizations; and an Impressive visitor center was erected.

Can a displaced hatchery manager become a successful refuge manager? Sherm Stairs did it, and did it in style. This "Man who Persevered" and my colleague to the south will be missed as the Manager of the Eastern Shore of Virginia Refuge. Fortunately, Sherm and his wife, Nancy, will continue living on the Shore. So don't be surprised to see him soon tooling around the Eastern of Virginia Shore National Wildlife Refuge wearing a blue volunteer hat.

Thanks, Sherm, for a job well done!

*John D. Schroer,
Refuge Manager - CNWR*