

[From Winter 1997-98]

Reflections on Work Camping (Part II)

At the conclusion of my previous column, my wife Phyllis and I had just arrived at Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge to start our first experience as volunteer work campers. We really did not know what to expect. We had never done this before and were rather apprehensive with regard to what was expected of us.

On Saturday morning we arrived at the Visitor Center and were greeted by Terry Roberts, an intern at the Refuge. He referred us to the Assistant Refuge Manager, Jim Wood. Another welcome and we were led to our trailer site and left to hook up and make ourselves comfortable. We were to be here for three weeks.

After spending a relaxing first night at the refuge, we awoke the next morning ready to conquer the world and give them everything we had to give. Much to our disappointment we learned that there really was no one who could spend time with us since they were working on a weekend schedule. We were pretty much left to our own devices. So we spent our time getting familiar with the Visitors Center and all the exhibits that were contained within its walls. It was a relatively new building, having been completed the year before, and full of information about the wildlife and history of the Eastern Shore of Virginia. An auditorium with the ability to show videos on a large screen was a feature along with many videos. In addition, a huge viewing window at the rear of the building made it possible to see bird life through a one way mirror. We could see the birds, but they could not see us. Included in that room were binoculars and view scopes along with a built-in directory of birds most frequently seen in the area.

Reporting to the refuge headquarters bright and early Monday morning (8:30 A.M.) we were surprised to find the staff had been hard at work since 7:30. Our first contact as we arrived was Irene Morris, the bright and cheerful headquarters Office Manager who directed us to Jim Kenyon, the Outdoor Recreation Planner who, as an adjunct to his duties, was also responsible for the volunteers. We were presented with uniform vests and caps and familiarized with the operation and functions of the refuge, which is there primarily to assure that wildlife and birds had a place available that was natural and relatively undisturbed by humanity. The full range of our responsibilities and duties were outlined. We were also introduced to Sue Rice, the Refuge Manager and the two maintenance personnel, Jerry Loomis and Bob Carpenter. With assistance from other US Fish and Wildlife Service personnel, they had taken a plot of land ceded to the Service by the US Air Force (it had been Fort John Custis during WW II, a heavy artillery base with huge concrete bunkers) and converted it to gentle rolling hills with several ponds, surrounded by salt marshes. It was a beautiful haven for migrating waterfowl, songbirds, shore and wading birds and raptors.

Our first day was sort of a "get acquainted" day. We worked in the Visitor Center and greeted and conversed with people from all parts of the country and several foreign nations. In the afternoon I was introduced to a collection of photographic slides that had not been

sorted out for several years and asked to see what I could do with it as far as getting it into some semblance of order.

As time progressed, we were allowed to accompany refuge personnel in taking bird surveys, the physical counting of birds, both migrating and native. This data was entered into computers for the general use of the entire Service.

An interesting and exciting experience was being sent out onto the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel and asked to record the fact that there was virtually no indication both northbound or southbound of the existence of the refuge. This was our first time on the bridge, and in addition to carrying out our assignment, we also had the experience of crossing to the restaurant area and doing some sightseeing at the same time.

But, far and away, our most exciting adventures took place when we were allowed to aid in banding birds. The first time we accompanied Bob out to Fisherman's Island, an island about one-half mile off the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula which is administered by the refuge and is restricted to staff and researchers (except when tours of the island take place). The previous evening, Bob had set some traps seeded with kernels of corn. When we arrived the following morning, we had four corn fed Black ducks and Mallards waiting to be banded and released. It was quite an experience to be able to hold a wild duck and then release it when the job was completed.

Our second encounter with wild birds occurred when we visited Reese Lukei, the volunteer who is considered the expert on raptors at the refuge. Reese, a retired Certified Public Accountant, has been banding raptors (birds of prey) for many years, and it is truly a labor of love. He is usually at his blind at daybreak and seldom leaves until sundown. He does this seven days a week during migration. Its really fascinating to watch this man work. In front of the blind is an open area of 1 1/2 acres, a portion of which is equipped with fine nets set on poles around it. Within the netted space he sets out a pigeon and a cowbird held in place by leather-like harnesses attached to strings leading to the blind. Upon sighting a hawk, Reese would juggle the strings, and the harnessed birds would act as if they were wounded. The hawk, seeing this swoops down to seize his prey and is trapped in the nets. At that moment Reese would rush down, gently release the bird from the net, quickly band it, record the pertinent information and release it. It was truly a wonder to watch.

I must relate to you that never have three weeks gone by as quickly as these did. The "work" that we were asked to perform was truly like play to us, and we thoroughly enjoyed it. We had done what most people never get to do and were privileged to work with some of the nicest people we have ever met. We were not unique in what we did. Several days before we left another volunteer arrived - a woman named Kay Money who was a full-time trailer dweller and traveled in the company of two crows and two snakes. More volunteers were to arrive in the near future.

I am writing this piece at my home in New Jersey, but I must admit that we could, with very little prodding, pack up the trailer and return to the Eastern Shore of Virginia National

Wildlife Refuge. With good luck and our health prevailing, perhaps we will be lucky enough to be invited back.

*Al Stoleroff,
Work Camper*