

Monarchs on the North Unit

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Prairie Grouse Dancing

I stopped my pickup and the caravan of seven vehicles behind, opened the truck door, and binoculars the East Lek three hundred yards north on the edge of a two-track sand fire lane.

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Kiosk Improvements

Many thanks to Gary Dunsmoor for remodeling and improving our two information kiosks.

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Friends and family recognized lifelong conservation leader Jim Evrard.

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Grandchildren are for the Outdoors!

What does an old grandfather do with six grandchildren? Give them the outdoors!

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# Namekagon Barrens the Wildlife Area

January 2022

Our mission is to develop programs and activities that educate and promote the importance of conserving Wisconsin's Northwest Sands pine-oak barrens habitat.

## THANKS TO OUR FIELD TRIP LEADERS & PARTICIPANTS!

Kathy Bartilson

**We are planning more field trips as well as our Blueberries on the Barrens day in 2022 — watch our new website and our newsletters for details.**

Greetings and thanks to everyone who participated in our field trips this summer. Thanks to our Board members especially for organizing and leading the treks. We found lupines that had been touched by frost, a record number of spring

birds, and very few blueberries due to the dry weather. But we had fun and learned new birds, wildflowers, and butterflies along the way.

One new hike we tried this summer was to see how many different plant species we could find in a square meter of ground. We had 12—14 distinct species! Botanist and Friend of the Barrens Paul Hlina led a “square meter” exercise, and we appreciate his

astounding knowledge of plant species. How many plants can you find in a square meter? Thanks Paul for the years of surveys that you have done cataloguing the plants in the Barrens and sharing your expertise.

This [link](#) will take you to a similar exercise covered in an article by the [Prairie Ecologist](#).

## FNBWA has a new website at [namekagonbarrens.org](http://namekagonbarrens.org)

Kathy Bartilson

Over the past couple of years, the FNBWA Board members have talked about upgrading our website. We identified the information and services we need to provide on-line, like sharing maps and happenings at the Barrens, reserving viewing blinds, and accepting memberships, etc. Getting from the idea stage to a usable site can be a long journey. Our Friends group has awesome Board members and volunteers. We want to express our appreciation especially to Bruce Pankratz, who created our first website, and stepped up to the job again to create the new one. Another person who helped move us from basic web tools to more complex and robust WordPress tools is Matt Nupen (Board member Mark Nupen's son). Matt set up the structure for the new site and trained volunteers to be able to create and populate pages. Matt and Bruce are also working on further automated email and event registration services for the site.

We send many thanks and much appreciation to Matt, Bruce, and all of the Board members who wrote updated information for the new site, and served on the website committee to be sure it will be helpful and appealing. Many thanks also to all of our members and supporters who have let us use your beautiful photographs for the website and our calendars and newsletters.

So, check out the new site. There are still changes and adjustments underway, especially when the site has to function well for desktop computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones. We'd appreciate suggestions if there are improvements we can make.



Botanist Paul Hlina leads field trip participants in the “square meter” plant identification survey. ~ Kathy Bartilson

## MONARCHS ON THE NORTH UNIT

Dave Peters

Monarchs will cluster in large groups in any number of trees or bushes just to keep warm, as you see them doing here in a Jack Pine on the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area. An interesting article by Kelsi Kroll, of Great Lakes Echo, talks about mowing or cutting milkweed to attract more Monarch butterflies. It seems counterintuitive, but the article explains why this works. The key is timing and how big of an area. Find that article [here](#).



Photo ~ Dave Peters

## Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area Self-Guided Tour Redo

For many years there has been a 19 stop auto tour on the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area. However, some of the tour information needed updating, and over half of the auto tour stop markers had been damaged, vandalized, or stolen, making for a difficult tour. Over the last year tour information has been updated, condensed, and rearranged, with the number of stops reduced to nine. Stops are at easily identified sites so special markers that seem to disappear are not needed. Tour/stop information includes NBWA background, wild and prescribed fire, barrens history, recreation, birds, of course including Sharp-tailed Grouse, other wildlife, and plant communities. Self-Guided Tours can be found at the north and south unit kiosks, on the FNBWA website (downloadable), or available at our many Friends events and annual picnic. Take the tour, and enjoy!



Auto Tour Marker on the Barrens. ~ Gary Dunsmoor

## JOIN OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

Your membership is very important to our success! Because of your support, we've hosted several events and we continue to expand awareness of the barrens and promote the significance of NBWA and barrens habitat. Please help us continue this work.

Renewing your membership is easy online, click here: [renew online](#).

## Trail cam Updates

Gary Dunsmoor

As reported in the last couple newsletters, a Wisconsin SnapShot trail camera was deployed on the Namekagon Barrens in 2020, helping give us a better idea of what all is

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Badger



Coyotes



Bear



Sharp-tailed grouse

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lurking on the Barrens. The camera is monitored at least once every three months, and recent checks did not disappoint. Critters 'captured' on camera include Gray Wolf, Coyote, Red Fox, Bobcat, Raccoon, Striped Skunk, crazy numbers of White-tailed Deer, Red Squirrel, Wild Turkey, Woodcock, a few song birds, and happily, numerous Sharp-tailed Grouse. I particularly enjoyed the leaping coyote, and the most recent check produced the first Black Bear, several times. Also of interest is the spring prescribed burn caught on camera. Due to 'I forgot' syndrome the camera was



not removed before the burn, but thankfully survived and documented the event. The camera documented how quickly the landscape greens up, and wildlife again begin using the area post burn management.

This DNR Wildlife citizen monitoring project utilizes trail cameras throughout the state to monitor wildlife and phenology. Organizations such as ours, individuals, families, and students have the opportunity to be involved in monitoring our wildlife resources to learn more about Wisconsin's wildlife, and help the WI DNR make management decisions to benefit these animals, their habitat, and people.

If you are interested in what Snapshot is all about, and would possibly be a volunteer, just follow this link [Snapshot WI](#). The website will also give you information on how you can help classify Snapshot animal pictures from all over the state.



Sharp-tailed grouse ~ Larry Dau

## PRAIRIE GROUSE DANCING

Jerome McAllister

I stopped my pickup and the caravan of seven vehicles behind, opened the truck door, and binocularized the East Lek three hundred yards north on the edge of a two-track sand fire lane. Prairie fire country in NW Wisconsin demands these lanes for fire suppression. Standing on the running board, I spotted three sharp-tailed grouse out on the lek standing still in lush green grass about a car-length right of the fire lane. The section containing the lek had been burned three weeks earlier, hence an early green for mid-May. My job that day was co-leading a fifteen-person birding field trip for the Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation, primarily to view the Wisconsin-rare sharp-tailed grouse and upland sandpiper, both ground nesters on the Namekagon Barrens. I shut the truck door quietly and motioned everyone to leave their vehicles and come forward quietly. The large plethora of vehicles was COVID-driven. Everyone was vaccinated; so, masks were gone. We slowly walked forward glassing the lek. Two more sharpies showed up toward the center of the sixty-foot diameter lek. About two hundred yards out, we stopped our creep. Everyone had their binoculars up for the next installment of the adventure.

More sharptails crossed the road to join the original three; others came out of the brush about the periphery to join the two in the center. In an instant, like the pistol crack of a hundred-yard dash, many of the grouse began dancing; the rest stood still like a theater audience. Most prairie grouse live in the northern plains of the USA into Canada. The northern plains Indians' (Sioux, Cheyenne, Ute) dances copied the grouse—wings out, bent over, stamping feet in a circular movement. The males dance annually during April and May. The females watch. Up to forty birds from a couple miles away crowd a single lek. Eventually the females choose a male and copulate on the spot. Generally, only one or two males get chosen per season; the rest will dance again next year if they survive the winter. Suddenly again, the dancing stopped.

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Our group moved forward slowly, again. The bright yellow lores of the males became visible. Fifteen birds flushed into a SW wind and clucked away in another successful escape from one of their many predators. There are several reasons Wisconsin sharptails are close to extinction. One is that the approximately 500 remaining sharptails have cordoned themselves into five remaining barrens prairies. These five contain about twenty thousand acres. That total state barrens remainder is less than fifty thousand acres from four million before European settlement. Interbreeding between the populations segments slows or ceases. The gene pools narrow in each population segment, and the population declines.

I am a board member of the Friends of the Namekagon Barrens. We exist to help the Wisconsin DNR maintain the existence of a sixty-five-hundred-acre short grass barrens prairie. There are many Wisconsin stakeholders who believe alternative land uses would be more practical. Our primary tactic is getting people to visit a remote part of Wisconsin and appreciate an exceedingly rare habitat, rare on a global scale as well. Birding field trips do just that! Annually we take fifteen people from all over the region birding on the third Saturday in May when the spring migration is at its peak on our latitude. Barrens migratory breeding birds are singing on perch. There are lots of five-foot tall oak trees on the barrens. People enjoy the unusual habitat and a wide variety of birds. Sharptails are a relatively easy spot. Upland sandpipers are in a nesting mode and a tough spot.

The 2021 bird checklist contained 54 species, a record high for the eighth annual trip. We saw thirty individual sharp-tailed grouse, also a record. All of them were near one of our three leks. Eleven species of the warblers, singing along Clemons Creek, with trees fully leafed, were an identification challenge. Scarlet tanagers, alder flycatchers, and rose-breasted grosbeaks were new to our annual list. The severe late-winter cold spell in Texas and other Gulf Coast states decimated the blue bird population. Not a one of our twenty-eight blue bird boxes contained one; most were occupied by tree swallows. Northern prairies attract many, many sparrows of several species for breeding. Most years we see hundreds of individuals along the roadside and singing in the tops of nearby dwarfed oaks. This year the Barrens attracted well under fifty individuals from only three species—clay-colored, field, and chipping. The severe Texas cold spell earlier in the year is a possible cause for the severe blue bird/sparrow downturn.

The leading photograph is of a dancing sharp-tailed grouse, and was taken by Larry Dau. He is an outstanding nature photographer from Boone, Iowa, who spends much time on the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area and donates beautiful photographs to the Friends organization.

## BECOME A VOLUNTEER

Share your experiences and photos of your visits to the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area. Help us spread the news! At this link, you can [CONTACT US](#) with stories, suggestions or questions. Or feel free to email to [email.fnbwa@gmail.com](mailto:email.fnbwa@gmail.com).

Just as easily, you may create a Flickr account and upload/share your photos with us [HERE](#).

## Square Meter Discoveries



Big Blue Stem



Pennsylvania Sedge



Bicknell's Rock Rose



Hairy Puccoon

## Kiosk Improvements

Kathy Bartilson

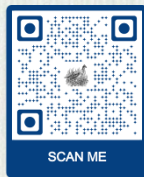
Many thanks to Gary Dunsmoor for remodeling and improving our two information kiosks (one on the North Unit at the corner of St. Croix Trail and Dry Landing Road, and one at the parking area in the South Unit). Over the years the kiosks had some deteriorated wood from rain and snow. Gary built roofs



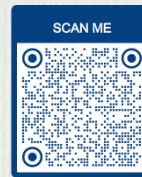
Upgraded South Unit Information Kiosk

~ Gary Dunsmoor

over the kiosks to keep out the rain, replaced damaged parts, and installed weather-proof brochure boxes. New maps and information are being posted regularly, along with QR codes visitors can use to access our website and the Self-guided Tour information.



Website QR Code



Self-guided Tour QR Code

## Off-road Vehicle Use is Impacting Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area Habitat

Kathy Bartilson

Unfortunately, ATV/UTV and trail bikes were often used in unauthorized areas this past summer, damaging fragile plants and churning up the sandy soils. Some of these vehi-

cles drove cross-country where there are no roads, others drove on the fire lanes (which are not open to off-road vehicle use) and on the plants bordering the fire lanes, creating sand walls and ruts.

We can use everyone's help so we can protect wildlife, habitat, and barrens vegetation. No matter what we drive in the Barrens, we need to go slow to not tear up the roads and to get a chance to see wildlife.



Ruts along the fire lane where off-road vehicles aren't allowed ~ Vern Drake



~ Larry Dau



~ Larry Dau



~ Larry Dau

We need to only drive where highway vehicles are authorized. Only certain official town roads can be used by ATVs, UTVs and other off-road vehicles (fire lanes in the NBWA are not authorized for this use, as mentioned above). In the past, signs making this clear have been damaged or stolen (along with signs for Self-guided Auto Tour stops).

Please pass the word to your circle of friends and family to help protect the Barrens and all of our public spaces by driving only where authorized, and visiting with the goal of habitat protection and enjoyment for all.

## Blueberries on the Barrens

Mark Nupen



Speaker Brian Finstad ~ Gary Dunsmoor

July 17, 2021 was our Blueberries on the Barrens public meeting, Rendezvous! We had 52 join us this year, BUT the blueberries really took a big hit from the drought! We always look around to pick out some good picking spots for the visitors. However, I had to go to the woods to find even some reasonable patches to pick around! Almost nothing out on the Barrens except very small patches. Even the flowers were not as prevalent.

## New Project Planned for the Barrens

Kathy Bartilson

The FNBWA Board met in October and voted to apply for a DNR Recreational Grant to build a small shelter on the North Unit near the current information kiosk (on the corner of St. Croix Trail and Dry Landing Road). It will give visitors a place to sit under a shaded roof and look out across the North Unit. The shelter will also have display boards for information about the plants and animals of the Barrens. We hope to build most of the structure with volunteer labor. If you are willing to help out, watch the website for postings on the work schedule next summer.



Kiosk Mock-up ~ Mark Nupen

We also discussed ways we can continue to promote the Barrens both with new groups, neighbors, and local citizens. We want to be sure everyone knows about the unique plants, animals, habitat and history of this State Wildlife Area, and gets a chance to enjoy and help conserve the Barrens.

We did have excellent speakers with Brian Finstad and Jane Anklam talking about development of the Northwest Sands Auto Trail, celebrating the old trail from St. Paul to Bayfield that also crossed the Namekagon River between the south and north units of NBWA. It is an amazing story from the mid 1800s. Originally of course mostly on foot or horseback until the

Namekagon river bridge was completed in 1860s, just down river from the current bridge on Namekagon Trail Road. We hope to help make that bridge site a Wisconsin Historical site. The bridge abutments look well preserved and amazingly the road on the south side remains the same except for trees growing on it for hundreds of feet. A road 160 years old??? That is unusual. Stay tuned as this site is promoted.

## Sculpture at Crex Honors Jim Evrard

Dave Evenson



Sculpture Dedication to Jim Evard ~ Vern Drake

Friends and family recognized lifelong conservation leader Jim Evrard, advocate for Crex Meadows and dedicated worker for sharp-tailed grouse and the sand barrens, with a David Groenjes metal sculpture of three sharptails on a dancing ground. This sculpture, which is placed in the prairie immediately in front of the Crex Meadows Interpretive Center, was dedicated at the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society meeting on August 21, 2021.

The placement is appropriate. While such an undertaking as the Crex Interpretive Center, and the more recent Mess Hall is always due to collaboration of many people, Jim and his wife, Shirley, were right up there as promoters, cajolers and workers in getting these projects to reality. Jim spent countless hours setting up fundraisers, including three Governor's Hunts, where donors made substantial contributions for the privilege of hunting with Tommy Thompson. He sat on the planning committees, offering suggestions, accepting compromises and doing all that long and stressful work in the background of any such projects.

Jim was a founding member of the Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society, and served as long time secretary, treasurer, newsletter editor and corporate conscience. As a researcher he wrote several publications on the history and value of the Northwest Sands of Wisconsin. One of these research projects focused on the wetlands of the Namekagon Barrens — Jim knew and loved your barrens as well as Crex.

Before Jim's death on February 10, 2020, he and Shirley often made hunting trips to the Dakotas. On one such trip they stopped at the ND Fish and Game building and noted the large displaying male sharptail statue on the front lawn. "That's what we should have at Crex," said Jim. Shirley remembered that thought, and directed any gifts that friends sent to WSGS or to Friends of Crex. Shirley, along with Ken Jonas and Bruce Moss of WSGS researched this idea and ultimately commissioned metal artist Dave Groenjes to complete the project.

## Time to Renew Your Membership in FNBWA

Kathy Bartilson

The New Year is coming! We appreciate everyone's support, and the many extra donations we received this year. We are also very grateful for all of the volunteer help with projects, field trips, our Blueberries on the Barrens day, and especially our road clean-up last spring.

Please take time to renew your membership to show your support for our organization and our mission in barrens conservation. You can renew on-line using [PayPal](#) (or credit card), or [print](#) a paper form to mail in. Thank-you!

## Grandchildren are for the Outdoors

Jerry McAllister

What does an old grandfather do with six grandchildren? Give them the outdoors! There is no better way to use his time. I live on a beautiful lake in Northwest Wisconsin about seventy miles from Lake Superior. My six grandchildren, ages three to eighteen, spend extended time at my lake home during summer. They travel six hours by car from east/central Iowa. All seven of us got way behind on the inheriting-the-outdoors thing in 2020. We are catching up quickly in 2021. This story is about one day in a fortnight of such when all came to Nana and PapaH's. Not all at once though, just continuously.

The "day" started three before when Coralee, the eighteen-year-old, made a request. She asked to go to the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area during her 2021 visit. PapaH has taken her there many times, mostly for birding but also for butterflies, blueberry picking, dog training, and picnics. It is a special place for PapaH. (Coralee has two Papas named Jerry.) This one is active in the NBWA Friends group, leads Barrens field trips for birders from Wisconsin and Minnesota, and gets his English setters ready for fall prairie grouse hunts out West during August each year.

Let's back up on the "day" for a little bit. PapaH writes magazine articles on birding at the NBWA from time to time, and he writes promotional pieces for the NBWA regularly. Most of these articles are accompanied by outdoor photographs from Larry Dau. The latter is an accomplished outdoors photographer from Iowa, specializing in avian photographs from Central

Iowa and the Namekagon Barrens. He donates a lot of his work to the Friends group. Just before Coralee's request, Larry emailed some pictures of a Mourning Warbler; the latter is named after the black "mourning" cape covering the head and upper body on a bright yellow torso. The Mourning is a tough spot because of its small numbers, dense northwoods habitat, and a very secretive lifestyle. Larry included multi-step directions for finding these migrant visitors from Central America.

Coralee was excited about the prospect of a birding treasure hunt. June, the ten-year-old, an accomplished birder rising quickly to the stature of Coralee, asked to come along. Acceptance was quick because June has



Mourning Warbler ~ Larry Dau

"the eyes" for outdoor critters of all sorts. Her elders are just average. Merritt, the-fifteen-year-old, asked to come so he could get away from Harmon-the five-year-old, but only if there was a place to fish. Merritt took up small-stream fly fishing during COVID; he does it walking from his rural Iowa home. I told him Clemons Creek rises from a spring in the Barrens and runs for a couple of miles before emptying into the much larger St. Croix River. A retired NBWA wildlife technician has observed fisher persons along the creek several times over his tenure. I bird Clemons for warblers in the spring and it looks trouty to me. So, Coralee and I had organized the "Magnificent Four" for a Mourning Warbler treasure hunt to the Namekagon Barrens, a seventy-five-minute drive to the northwest.

We arrived at the Barrens just before nine o'clock, and as it turned out not long before the day's birding window slammed shut. It was 68F and an hour later 93F. There are no main roads within fifteen miles of the remote Barrens, just not-so-good gravel roads and sand

two tracks which serve as fire breaks on the 6,428-acre property during annual prescribed burns. Merritt was dumped out at a deer trail a quarter mile down a two track from the spot where Clemons crosses the gravel in the Dau directions. Merritt was told not to leave the Creek, not to cross the road and that we'd be back in 45 minutes. We'd find him on the creek or better yet by cell phone. He put on chest waders and bounded off.

We were about five miles from the Larry Dau Mourning Warbler hot spot. The gravel is named Dry Landing Road. From Clemons, the directions said drive 2.5 miles north where Dry Landing takes a ninety-degree turn east, go past two big swamps to the north and then a short way farther is a second gravel. At that point turn north and go a few yards to a stop sign on a parallel snowmobile road. (They get their "priorities" correct in the Northwoods.) Finally from Larry, bird along the second gravel road by foot north and south of the stop sign, about twenty yards in each direction. And, be patient. Larry averaged an hour wait per picture for each of his seven Mourning Warbler shots.

On the slow drive to the appointed stop sign, "The Eyes" found Barrens birds and Coralee identified them. Eastern Towhees with spotted maroon breasts and "Drink-More Tea" songs were perched in the tops of stunted bur oaks; they had staked out one territory after the other for the entire drive. Yellow Warblers flashed their bright yellow flickering in the brush feeding from ground to perch. Brilliant blue Indigo Buntings sang from perches high in the few trees taller than ten feet. Additional nesters spotted were Eastern Kingbird, Song Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Dickcissel, Tree Swallow, Catbird, and Blue Jay. Dau had commented on these species in his email, too.

Voila, the stop sign was right where it was supposed to be; the habitat, across the road from the Barrens in county forest property, was a dense dark verdant stand of mixed hardwood/conifer. It was quiet. Coralee eased out of the pickup and immediately heard the Mourning Warbler song from maybe fifty yards into the bush. We slowly birded from the shadows along the anointed stretch. Little birds flickered in the leaves and needles never stopping long enough to get binocularized. I heard the Mourning alarm call twice, once clear and nearby and the second farther away. The cell phone rang!

Merritt said to get back. Clemons Creek was mostly dry, never more than an inch deep and stagnant. The sun was scorching. Tick and mosquitoes, attacking from all directions. Meet you at the road, we answered.

Ten minutes later at Dry Landing and Clemons, there was no Merritt. A horn honk produced nothing. We walked down the two track calling his name. Nothing yet again. At the deer trail where we had dropped him off, Merritt sat in his chest waders, hidden in the brush, at the entrance to the deer trail. He said my orders were, "Do not cross the road." My bad, the "road" was Dry Landing, not the two track.

Merritt had had the time of his life exploring the mostly dry creek bed. It was wilderness and it was fun, at least until the heat hit and the bug uprising began. Coralee and June thought the treasure hunt to be as good as it gets on a birding adventure. Upon driving out, we found a quarter-mile stretch of gaudy orange Butterfly milkweed plants. Each plant held a half dozen Monarch Butterflies and some the yellow-black-white monarch caterpillars also.



June and Coralee Near the Stop Sign ~ Jerry McAllister



Butterfly Weed and Monarch Caterpillar ~ Coralee

