



SPRING 2020 | VOLUME XVII

# Friends of the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area

*A seasonal newsletter highlighting FNBWA annual educational efforts on NBWA along with demonstrating the beauty, plant and animal diversity, management techniques, and necessity to perpetuate barrens habitat on NBWA and the sandy region of Northwest Wisconsin.*

## The FNBWA “Don’t Get Lost” Sign Project

By Gary Dunsmoor

### **Have you ever become lost trying to find the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area?**

Have you become turned around and found you are not sure where you are once on the Barrens? Thanks to the generous donations of our members, the FNBWA initiated a sign project last year to help alleviate the lost syndrome. So finding and getting around the NBWA is now getting a little easier.

First the Friends group was able to get signs placed on Hwy 35 and Hwy 77 pointing the way to the Barrens.

Thanks to WDOT for ordering, and Burnett County Hwy Department for placing those signs in September.

Second, the FNBWA was given permission to memorialize longtime friends and enthusiasts of the Barrens, Bruce DeLong and Dan Lien with a firebreak named after them.

Those signs were placed, along with refurbished Gomulak and Clemens Fire lane signs in late fall.

Third, signs pointing to the Barrens were ordered this winter to place at strategic township road corners. Hopefully those signs will be put up early this spring, prior to our schedule of special events. An effort to make finding the Barrens more joy ride than lost syndrome!



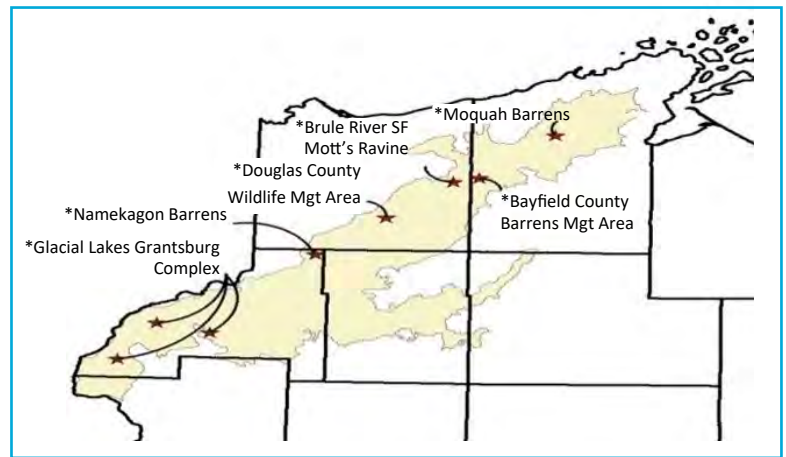
*Photo courtesy Mark Nupen*

# FNBWA

## What lurks on the Barrens?

By Gary Dunsmoor

A **SNAPSHOT WISCONSIN CAMERA** was deployed on the NBWA this winter to hopefully capture 'on camera' animals of the barrens. Snapshot Wisconsin is a volunteer-based project which utilizes a statewide network of trail cameras to monitor wildlife year-round. Volunteers host trail cameras throughout Wisconsin's landscapes, giving individuals, families, students, and organizations like FNBWA a unique opportunity to get involved in monitoring the state's valuable natural resources. The photos of diverse wildlife captured on Snapshot Wisconsin cameras are hosted online, where they can be classified by volunteers across the globe. The resulting dataset is used to inform WDNR management decisions, and help us learn more about Wisconsin's wildlife. While wildlife may be scarce on the barrens in the winter, spring, summer and fall should produce a variety of larger animals and possibly even birds on the camera. If you are interested in what Snapshot is all about and possibly be a volunteer just go to the WI DNR website and type Snapshot in the search bar. Look for barrens Snapshot critter photos in future newsletters, on our Facebook page, and website!



Northwest Sands Barrens  
Management Areas

## I love the cascade of colors from flowers on the barrens beginning with the Pasque Flower.

By Mark Nupen

Ah, the winter is passing to a new spring season. I love the cascade of colors from flowers on the barrens beginning with the Pasque Flower. Did you see FNBWA Facebook entry March 18th? Such a surprise to see this rather large flower tucked in amongst the dead grasses and brush from last season.

"Barrens? I heard about the barrens!" Did I mention that most people have heard about the barrens but don't really understand what that barrens word really means? Don't even know where the barrens are!

Lets start with the location map of "the Northwest Sands Barrens." This map shows how large this very sandy habitat really is. In Wisconsin, examples include **NBWA Crex Meadows**, the **Douglas County Wildlife Area** (more commonly known as the Bird Sanctuary) and **Moquah Barrens** east of Superior. These areas are managed with the use of a key ingredient — FIRE! Varieties of birds, animals and plants find their home in barrens habitat. And only barrens habitat.



Sand is also key here. The Norwest Sands is covered in it 100-600 feet thick! I have a cabin in this area and the well driller told me he drilled through 90 feet of pure sand. Believe it, when you pour water on it, you won't get any puddles!

Driving through this area you will find some lakes, some streams and even have some farms. There are large areas of barrens habitat where you will not see the farms because of the very sandy soil. In the 1850s, some areas were described as 'Pine Barrens' by the early land surveyors. This land would be relatively open with scattered jack pine, red pine, scrub oak and hazelnut bushes. The area would dry out easily and catch fire — keeping the land brushy and without many trees. The Native Americans used fire to promote better blue-

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berry habitat — blueberries being a regular staple of their diets.

Considering the soil, it's no surprise that farming attempts largely failed in the early 1900's. Most of the land was tax forfeited back to counties as farms failed. Burnett County, and other counties, then got into forestry projects and lumbering. Red pine plantations were planted. Hundreds of acres are still managed in this manner. That's part of the reason some people see so little of the barrens habitat. And further, it is sometimes then assumed that somehow the barrens was created by destroying the pine plantations!

If you drive out to the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area you MUST GET

OUT OF YOUR CAR and walk around. Look down and you see an enormous variety of plants and flowers. Listen to the birds. Many different kinds of birds exist in the barrens or migrate through that you may not hear in your neighborhoods. Ah, there is also the fragrance (I call it nature's perfume). Sweet fern is a leafy bush commonly found in the northwestern part of NBWA. Beyond smelling great the leaves also make a nice tea.

Sharp-tail grouse mating dances can be observed in April. This is one of mother nature's Best Sex Scenes and is also rather comical.

It always surprises me what I see, hear, smell or find out on the Barrens. Try it!

## Why All the Sand on the Barrens?

By Kathy Bartilson

### Good question!

Why is there this amazing band of sand from Bayfield County to Burnett County and on south into Minnesota? FNBWA Board member Dave Peters has written an excellent brochure describing the geology and glaciation that resulted in this special habitat we enjoy. Find out all about it by downloading this new brochure at [\*\*FNBWA Geology Brochure\*\*](#).



A sandy road in the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area.

Photo courtesy Dave Peters



Thank you to all that have renewed their membership! Because of you we are able to continue our education outreach regarding the importance of NBWA and barrens habitat.

It's never too late to renew/make a donation for Barrens conservation in 2020. Just follow this link! [\*\*Join, Renew, Donate\*\*](#)

Checks may be sent to FNBWA Treasurer:

Gary Dunsmoor  
N4961 Beaverbrook Ave  
Spooner, WI 54801



*photo courtesy Mike Hornung*

**Altogether, our group saw 26 Sharp-tailed Grouse, five times the average, and we identified 28 total species out on the wet, windy prairie.**

By Jerry McAllister

The third Saturday of May each year, I co-lead a birding field trip for the Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation to the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area (NWBA) in Burnett County. Attendees come from many places in Wisconsin and Minnesota to see Sharp-tailed Grouse, Upland Sandpipers, and other spring migrant prairie nesters. This year, Saturday May 18 was a big bird day. The rain started during the night before and brought gusty wind and unheard-of low temperatures. Before the 8:30 AM start 11 participants cancelled due to weather. Several early morning cell calls told me that the six remainees, from 17 reservations, were having trouble talking themselves into navigating the sloppy, soft sand/gravel roads leading to the start point—a rustic cabin without water or electricity. I coaxed them in by cell phone, and we had the cabin warmed up for them with hot coffee and a wood stove.

Sharptails are almost extirpated in Wisconsin; the 6500-acre NBWA is the only location with a healthy population. In three vehicles, we crept across the barrens prairie along a sandy fire lane looking for hearty birdlife on perches or on the ground. The weather gave us little to see, but we flushed three single sharptails and a double from the roadside. Five-sharpies is about the average for our annual spring field trip. This was a good result, but only the first vehicle saw these sharptails. It was still near dark at 9:00 AM when we crept upon one of the leks, places where male sharptail dance in the spring to attract females for reproduction. There were big brown blobs on the bare ground viewed from about 150 yards away. The birds flushed and swirled about the vehicles overhead giving their frightened alarm clucks. We counted 19 Sharp-tailed Grouse in the flock. While investigating the lek on foot, a straggler flushed. A little later, we all viewed a sharptail perched in a tree. Both the flock on the lek long after day-break and the perched individual were very unusual experiences for birders on foot or in a vehicle. Altogether our group saw 26 Sharp-tailed Grouse, five times the average, and we identified 28 total species (annual average about 35) out on the wet, windy prairie. This included three not heretofore seen on the Barrens—a pair of Ring-necked Ducks, a Palm Warbler, and a Green Heron. All of these results were un-

NEWS  
FROM  
THE

Enjoy this report from Jerry  
**McAllister** about last year's  
birding event on the  
Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area.

*FNBWA*

doubtedly weather-related. The six guests had a wonderful time. However, all of the above, except the weather, is not why May 18 was a Big Bird Day.

The significant birding event was occurring at my cabin on Big Sissabagama Lake in Washburn County about 50 miles to the southeast. The weather there was the same as that on the Barrens. The habitat at the cabin along the lakeshore is different, mixed pine/hardwoods forest. The cabin is log, 82-years old, and stands only 10 yards from the water. Huge ancient red pines stand in the narrow strip between cabin and water's edge; their lowest limbs beginning 25 feet above the water and draping gracefully down almost to the surface. Looking across the lake from the large windows of an enclosed porch, the entire lake appears in panorama through a red pine bough curtain.

One of the barrens field trip co-leaders was my granddaughter Coralee. When we arrived back at the cabin at 1:00 PM, Coralee's mother, grandmother, sister and brother were seated on the porch eating lunch. They, all birders, were excited. The three-year-old brother Harmon had just announced that two red birds and a yellow one were in a tree branch right outside the



*Pair of Breeding Ring Necks*

*Photo courtesy All About Birds!*

*This included 3 not heretofore seen on the Barrens—a pair of Ring-necked Ducks, a Palm Warbler, and a Green Heron.*

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They seemed to be thanking her for the food and shelter.

*Photos courtesy Coralee McAllister*

window. Ruby, his mother, identified them as male and female Scarlet Tanagers. This event began a two-hour saga which I deemed “A Big Day” in birder parlance. Quickly, we all assumed roles for the birding event. Ruby and Coralee took up binoculars. June, the seven-year-old sister with the best bird eyes on the planet, became the spotter going up and down the porch from window to window looking for birds and calling out their locations. Hope, the grandmother became the scribe, and I, using a Nat Geo bird identification guide, became the identifier using instructions and confirmations by the binoculars. Harmon self-congratulated himself and returned to playing on the floors with his toy cars.

Meanwhile, tiny dark birds darted back and forth from the pine limbs, to the ground, to the rocky water’s edge. Flocks of them swirled low about the bay which holds the cabin. The bank from the cabin windows to the water drops off about 10 feet in elevation and the actual water’s edge was not in view. Most identifications were made in red pine boughs. We identified multiple individuals from 14 species—Scarlet Tanager, Eastern Wood-

Peewee, and 12 wood warblers. The warblers were Golden-winged, Orange-crowned, Nashville, American Redstart, Cape May, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Yellow-rumped, and Black-throated Green. This was an astonishing event. This number of warblers could never be identified over many years from the four red pines near the water. It would take a lot of years and hundreds of hours to see them on my two acre lot which includes a flowing brook, many more pines, aspens, oaks, and a wetland. An accomplished birder who spent many days over a birding season throughout Sawyer County looking for these 12 warblers each in its proper habitat would be lucky to find them all.

The astonishing event which brought this birding extravaganza is called “a fallout.” My permanent home is 75 miles to the south. Warblers, orioles, tanagers and rose-breasted grosbeaks first appeared there on Thursday morning. That same day I drove to my cabin and saw only two individual warblers. On Friday morning I birded the Barrens for three hours and saw only one individual warbler. Again, at my cabin Friday

evening, I saw only one warbler. Overnight it became cloudy, the temperature dropped from near 70F to 34F, and the wind rose from 5 mph to 20 mph. Sometime during the summer-like Friday, the migrating tanagers and warblers arrived at the cabin latitude, approximately 100 miles north of the 45th parallel, half-way to the North Pole. There, these migrating birds hit a bad-weather wall and fell out in areas providing food and cover. My cabin and red pines provided the cover. What they were eating is something Coralee discovered. She put on her raingear, went outside and sat on the dock about ten yards from the bank. The warblers were eating bugs just above the waters edge where there was no wind with warmth coming from the lake water. A couple warblers momentarily lit on her while watching “The Big Bird Day” from my dock. They seemed to be thanking her for the food and shelter.

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# FNBWA 2020 EVENTS

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

*This is our current list of events for the year. Please check our Facebook page for possible cancelations.*

*all events are free and open to the public*

## NATURAL RESOURCE FOUNDATION FIELD TRIPS:

Registration for these 2 events must be completed online at: **Natural Resources Foundation-Trips**

Birding — Saturday, May 23

Bog Walk — Saturday, June 13

## FRIENDS OF THE NAMEKAGON BARRENS

### ANNUAL BLUEBERRIES ON THE BARRENS CELEBRATION:

Saturday, July 18

### FRIENDS OF THE NAMEKAGON BARRENS HIKES:

Bog Walk — Tuesday, June 9

Plant Walk — Saturday, June 27

Blueberry Walk — Wednesday, July 15

Geology Tour — Saturday, August 1

Bird Dogs — Wednesday, August 12

Wildflowers — Wednesday August 19

*All events start at 9:00 am; Leaders will be at the Cabin at 8:30 am*

The Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area Cabin is located at 33174 Gomulak Fire Lane, ~14 miles west of Minong, WI (9 miles east of Hwy 35; and 8 miles north of Hwy 77)



**FNBWA**  
BARRENS  
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[fnbwa.org](http://fnbwa.org)

## Why Care About Birds?



### Bird Habitat Supports Clean Water

Over 60% of drinking water comes from rivers and streams. Protecting waterways and watersheds protects bird habitat and provides clean water.

[3billionbirds.org/why-birds-matter](http://3billionbirds.org/why-birds-matter)