THE GREEN BAY WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

By CLARA HUSSONG

The Green Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, which members of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology visited during the 1953 spring convention in Green Bay, started out as most projects of that kind do—with forty acres and a dream. A tract of forty acres of marsh land owned by the city was scheduled to be drained, filled in, and made into a public golf course or some other public project. The land was only a block or two away from the bay waters, and separated from the bay by a public road. This was in 1935.

A group of outdoor-minded people had other dreams. Some of them had visited Jack Miner's bird sanctuary in Ontario, and wondered why we couldn't have one here. “Letters to the editor” and other publicity followed, and later that year an open meeting to discuss the project was called. About fifty people attended this meeting, discussing pro and con the dreams held by the originators of the sanctuary idea—geese and ducks nesting there, waterfowl and shorebirds pausing at the lagoons in migration, song birds using tree cover (still only a dream) as a resting spot during migration. Some of the pictures painted by the “dreamers” seemed so far beyond the expectation of most of the audience that they smiled hopefully, but skeptically.

Nevertheless the Green Bay Wildlife Sanctuary Club was formed in 1937, its first president being Chester Cole—a Green Bay high school science teacher, and one of the most enthusiastic originators of the sanctuary idea. This club was entirely separate from the Green Bay Bird Club, although several members of the latter, including the writer, served on the former group’s board of directors. In the same year, the forty acres—part of a 200-acre marsh area originally purchased by the city for park purposes—was turned over to the Green Bay Wildlife Sanctuary Club “to see what they could do with that crazy idea of theirs of a bird sanctuary.”

Club members started digging—literally and by hand. Donations of money were received from individuals, civic groups and industrial firms; the latter also donated machinery and manpower in some instances to further the work of developing the area, making a refuge out of what was formerly called “worthless land.” The first lagoons were small; but they were enlarged when help came in the form of NYA appropriations, and later—from 1938 to 1941—when the work became a WPA project. During those three years the “city fathers” and the public were won over to the idea of a bird sanctuary, and the entire 200 acres were then designated as sanctuary land.

Plans for the sanctuary were drawn up by Marshall Simonds, Green Bay park superintendent and a member of the Green Bay Bird Club. His good judgment in choosing what was to be done, and directing the work, made the sanctuary what it is today. Trees and vegetation were chosen for their food and cover value; some spots were filled in, while others were left to attract marsh-inhabiting species. There are now three
miles of lagoons, a small public park area at the entrance, and 150 acres which are shut off from the public during the nesting season.

A small island has been cleared of brush, developed into a small hill and covered with gravel. Corn is strewn there daily during the winter months, and from 500 to 2000 ducks and as many as fifty Canada geese are fed there daily during the cold months. Open water in one pond is maintained throughout the winter by means of a pump in one of the buildings. On the coldest mornings the sanctuary custodian chops a hole in the ice near the island; the birds do the rest in keeping the spot open during the day.

In summer the willow thrush sings its quavering spiral in the swampy sections of the sanctuary. In the marsh one can find both marsh wrens, gallinules, soras, bitterns, and many other species. The Henslow’s sparrow sits on marsh blades and hiccoughs its little notes, and scarlet tanagers and rose-breasted grosbeaks sing from the tips of aspen trees. Ducks and geese use the “refuge area” in the south end of the sanctuary for nesting. Nesting ducks include the mallard, black duck, pintail, blue-winged teal, and probably the shoveller. Mr. Simonds estimates that about fifty young Canada geese were raised from seven nesting pairs in 1953.

A Varied Habitat

The habitat of the sanctuary is varied enough to attract a wide variety of species in spring and fall migration. Green Bay Bird Club members make it a point to listen and look for birds along the eastern extremity of the grounds on “High Bird Day” in May; records of rarer rails and other shorebirds have often resulted. Several American egrets showed up in August in 1953. In 1950 a snowy egret with an injured wing remained here from September to early November; it was observed numerous times by Mr. and Mrs. Simonds, and was photographed by Mr. Husson. This is but one example of the rarities which can be expected in a place of this sort.

Sanctuary buildings include a pump house, custodian’s quarters, and attached to the latter a glassed-in observation platform where visitors may watch the birds during cold or rainy weather. Small paper bags of shelled corn are on sale here, and the money obtained in this way is enough to pay for the cost of feed all through the year.

School classes and scout groups are often taken to the Wildlife Sanctuary on field trips, and visitors from other parts of the country are escorted there by proud Green Bay citizens. There are hundreds of visitors at the sanctuary each weekend; most of them know little about the southern part of the sanctuary that is used as a refuge, but they are attracted by the landscaped foregrounds and the shelter and viewing stands. Those of us who were “in” on the beginnings of the project and members of the now dissolved Wildlife Sanctuary Club remember how hard we worked to get support for the idea eighteen years ago. It was well worth the effort; our dreams are coming true.

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