

WHAT A Wonderful WORLD

The Stewart B. McKinney Wildlife Refuge

By Katherine Hauswirth

Connecticut's shoreline is generous with its wonders. Even a casual drive down a waterside byway can treat us to a heron sighting or a glowing sunset over the Sound. But the treat that is the Stewart B. McKinney Wildlife Refuge, covering 70 miles of coast, is worth a special trip.

Named after the congressman who helped to expand its reach, the refuge is made up of 10 units stretching from Greenwich to Westbrook. It is located within the Atlantic Flyway—a major route by which migratory birds reach breeding and wintering areas, making crucial rest stops along the way.

The Salt Meadow Unit at Westbrook, the Refuge's headquarters, comprises 316 acres of salt marsh, forest, grassland and shrubland, interspersed with about two miles of trails. Shaun Roche, Visitor Services



Manager, offers a wealth of information about the place. For starters, he hopes more visitors learn about the Salt Meadow's "neat history" as home to a fascinating pair of women (see sidebar). An application to add it to the National Register of Historic Places is planned.

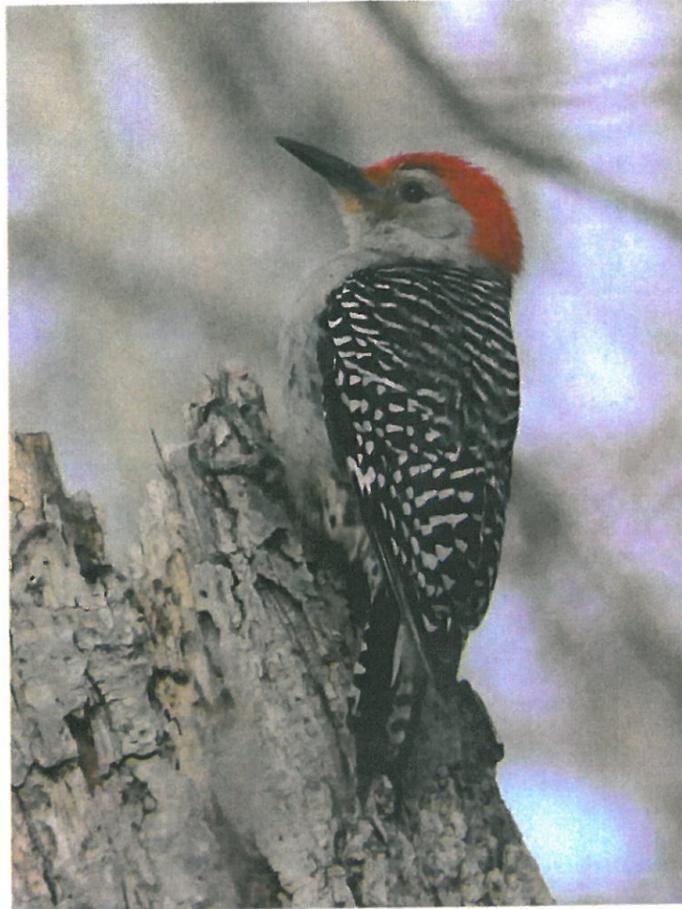
Roche recounts delights that await visitors in each season. Multitudes of flowers, both naturally occurring and planted, pop up as spring arrives full force. Previously a bit vexed by the wide and random pattern of daffodils on the large lawn near his office, Roche felt more forgiving when he learned that Eleanor Roosevelt herself had planted bulbs there. Now the lawnmower is driven with great care around these beauties.

In the summer, the marsh is especially captivating during the first morning hours, and as autumn unfolds both marsh grasses and trees get busy changing their colors.

Snow at Salt Meadow attracts cross country skiers, snowshoers, and naturalists looking for

fresh tracks. A large platform over the marsh is a first-rate place for spotting water birds such as Snowy Egrets, Glossy Ibises, and Black-crowned Night Herons. Birds are often born on local islands, and they fly to Salt Meadow for food. For new birders, it can take time and patience to spot them amid their grassy camouflage. Roche finds great satisfaction in seeing them feed, knowing that the Refuge is protecting them. Every day is different here. One day, during migration, you might see a large flock of Northern Flickers (woodpecker variety) on the lawn near the office.

Or you might spot staff and volunteers tackling invasive species such as the Multiflora Rose and Porcelain Berries. Another key staff responsibility is making sure that the shrubland areas here continue to thrive.



At left, a great egret and above, a red bellied woodpecker, are among the inhabitants of the McKinney Refuge.

At lower right, Elizabeth Read, Esther Lape, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Malvina Thompson gather around a stone table, of which a circular bench still remains at Salt Meadow. (All photos courtesy of the Stewart B. McKinney Wildlife Refuge staff.)

Since the volume of farmland has diminished, there are far fewer places that boast this habitat. Creatures including Eastern Box Turtles, rabbits, and woodcocks need these brushy areas so they can hide and find food. (And often love: for a special treat, observe the American Woodcock's mating ritual this spring, with the help of an expert lecture). Other free programs have included ethnobotany, wildflower, and foliage walks, and new programs are being planned.

Spring is a prime time for getting acquainted with the Refuge's Westbrook treasure. But any day, in any season, holds promise for visits to this haven for wildlife and visitors alike.

THE LADIES IN THE MEADOW

Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read, described as "post-suffrage feminist activists," used the Westbrook property, a former farm that they named Salt Meadow, as a summer estate for many years, beginning in the 1920s. Initially they lived in the existing farmhouse while they built a much larger, villa-style home. The home (now offices) boasts a balcony that once looked straight across the meadow to the Long Island Sound.

Elizabeth, an attorney, died in the 1940s, but Esther lived until she was 100, donating the initial 140 acres of the Refuge to the US Department of the Interior. The trails around the site closely follow the footprint left by the pair.

Not far down the trail is the spot where the pair often sat at a stone table, and visitors can still rest on the remaining circular stone bench. Nearby is a memorial stone at the base of an oak tree with the couple's initials. The Latin phrase means "In life and ever after."

The couple was socially conscious and socially prominent. They encouraged women to vote via The League of Women Voters, and it was there that they struck up a friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt. Roosevelt frequented Salt Meadow, writing some of her newspaper columns from the log cabin still on the grounds. Esther and Elizabeth championed several national and global causes, not least among them the conservation of natural landscapes that benefits us today.

