



MINNEOPA

MESSENGER

Newsletter of the Friends of Minneopa State Park

No. 39, October 2007

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Randy Schindle, DNR Forester, Talks About Prairies, Wildflowers! – Don't Miss the Autumn Meeting

The autumn meeting of the Friends of Minneopa will be held on **Thursday, October 18, 2007, at 7 p.m.** in the basement of City Hall at 1004 Belgrade Avenue in North Mankato, across the parking lot from our usual meeting room.

Randy Schindle, DNR forester for the Mankato area, will present a program on native prairie life and ecology. Randy has a special interest in and much knowledge about prairie wildflowers.

Refreshments will be served as usual. We hope to see you there!

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Manager's Corner

By Howard Ward, manager of Minneopa State Park

As I write this we are near the mid-point of the fall color change here at Minneopa. Each week updates are provided to the Minnesota Office of Tourism by Minnesota State Parks across the state and this data has become the main source of up to date information on the Explore Minnesota web pages. Unfortunately this year is not shaping up well for brilliant color here and sixty-three mile per hour wind gusts yesterday removed many of our most colorful leaves.

The contract has been awarded for our trailer dump station and construction is scheduled to begin yet this fall. The bid was awarded to James Brothers Construction of Elysian, MN and came in under projected cost estimates. We are excited to finally be able to offer this amenity to our camping clients.

I have some exciting news to share. Some of you may not yet be aware that the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has awarded a Phase II (implementation) clean water partnership grant to the City of Lake Crystal for the Crystal/Loon/Mills **[See Park Manager, p. 4]**

MINNEOPA BLUEBIRD (NESTBOX) TRAIL – Annual Report

The bluebird trail at Minneopa State Park begins east of the picnic area and proceeds toward the campground, then for a time follows the walking trail along the north side of the park (Boxes 1-21), and then strikes out across the open prairie. Since the beginning of the bluebird trail in 1982 there has been quite a change in the vegetative habitat.

When the trail was established, the first 21 boxes were located along the edge of the woods so that the openings faced prairie habitat. From 1982 through about 1995 most of the Eastern Bluebird young were reared in these first 20 boxes. The boxes located on the open prairie had a few bluebird nests but most were used by Tree Swallows.

Since 1982 the woody vegetation, especially the sumac, has progressively expanded into the open area next to the woods and has filled in around Boxes 1-21. This has significantly changed the species of birds using the boxes. Since 1995 most Eastern Bluebirds have used the prairie boxes and Boxes 1-21 have been used more by House Wrens and Black-capped Chickadees. There were no chickadee nests until one was found in 1988, then a few from 1992 to 1995. Since 1995 there have been 5 to 8 chickadee nests every year and also an increase in the number of House Wren nests in Boxes 1-21.

Possibly more Eastern Bluebirds would be hatched if Boxes 1-21 were moved to new locations on the prairie. However, it would probably take several years and a lot of talking to get the DNR Regional Office to agree to this. Anyhow, the other species do need boxes for their reproduction.

Even though there has been a change in where the bluebirds nest over the years, their reproduction numbers have

remained very similar. This year 63 Eastern Bluebirds were fledged (from 96 eggs with 77 hatched). Over the 25 years the average number of fledglings is 61.8. (1982 through 2007 is 26 years. Because of my health the boxes were not checked in 2005, causing the discrepancy.)

Here are the numbers for the other species using the boxes. Tree Swallow reproduction was low, 64 fledged this year, compared to an average of 93. A possible reason for this is that after we had a period of cold, wet weather in mid April I found 46 dead adult swallows in the boxes. They probably died from cold and starvation. Many of the boxes contained dead birds, from 1 to as many as 9. The number of House Wren fledglings was above average, 118 this year compared to the average of 66.2. I feel that several pairs nested 3 times. Black-capped Chickadees fledged 9 this year, close to their average of 10 over 15 years.

Following is the number of birds that have been raised (fledged) at Minneopa over the last 25 years: Eastern Bluebirds, 1,546; Tree Swallows, 2,328; House Wrens, 1,654; and Black-capped Chickadees, 160, for a total of 5,633 birds raised in the 50 boxes.

That's the report for this year. Have a great winter, you and the birds, and we will see how our feathered friends do next year.

Merrill (Frydendall, president-elect)

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Friends Strengthen Non-Profit Status

The Friends Governing Board has decided to form a financial agency relationship with the Park and Trails Council that will allow them to provide IRS certification of non-profit status for us in cases of large donations or bequests that require it. This allows the Friends to avoid large fees and burdensome paperwork but still be able to provide official certification of our status to donors who need it.

Minneopa State Park and the Railroads

By Tim Pulis, past president of the Friends

Railroads have played a large part in the history and development of Minneopa State Park. The two railroads that go through the park both predate the establishment of the park in 1905. If you drive into the City of Mankato's Land of Memories Park, look to your left (west) as you go over the single railroad track. The track becomes two tracks very shortly. The left or south track is the Union Pacific Railroad which heads toward Lake Crystal and beyond, running right by the Minneopa Falls section of the park. The right or north track is the Dakota Minnesota and Eastern Railroad (DM&E), which runs along the Minnesota River directly below the campground on Minneopa Park's prairie side and heads toward New Ulm. In this issue of the Messenger I will give a brief history of the Union Pacific Railroad and its relationship to Minneopa Park. Next time we'll look at the DM&E.

In the late 1860's several railroads were being built toward and eventually through Mankato. The St. Paul & Sioux City Railroad had depots in LeSueur, St. Peter and Mankato and was heading west. In November of 1869 the trestle over Minneopa Creek was finished and soon tracks were laid to Lake Crystal. Don't look for the trestle because it was soon replaced by tunneling the creek and covering it with fill. The choice of where railroads put their depots could make or break a town site. Lake Crystal was merely a field in May of 1869. By that fall there were 40 buildings including an elevator, depot and post office. Likewise the choice of Minneopa to have a depot was fortuitous for it and sounded the end for South Bend, located halfway between Minneopa and Mankato.

D.C. Evans was the owner of the land at Minneopa Falls. He platted the town in 1870 and it prospered. The St. Paul & Sioux City Railroad started things by building the depot and elevator in 1869. They named the depot Minneinneopa. It was an English version of the Sioux words Minne(water) inne(falling) opa(twice). It was shortened to Minneopa by D.C. Evans. Soon the town had a hotel, store, blacksmith shop, lumber yard and other buildings. Things went well until 1875 when a

grasshopper infestation destroyed crops for three years. Then in the 1880's a fire destroyed many buildings and the town slowly disappeared. Today you can't tell a town called Minneopa ever existed.

While the commercial aspect of the Minneopa area rose and fell, the railroad provided transportation for another facet of Minneopa – tourism to the waterfalls and park. In 1869 D.C. Evans cleared the falls area of shrubs, built a stairway down to the ravine and a bridge over the creek. Camp meetings of 3,000-5,000 people and groups from schools and clubs came during the summer. It would be interesting to see the logistics of feeding and finding toilet facilities for that many people and how much money D.C. Evans made from it all. It is likely that until the automobile became popular, the railroad continued to bring people to the park into the 1900's and was a big reason the land became a state park in 1905.

In 1905 the railroad moved the tracks over to where they are now in order to straighten out some curves. In the process they made a large cut into the south side of the cemetery hill. Heavy rains in 1908 eroded the loose dirt and some bodies washed down the hillside from the cemetery. Today you can see limestone rip rap is not so neatly piled on the slope to prevent future erosion. The Mankato Free Press had an article that describes 1908 as the big frog year. "In many places especially Lake Crystal, the influx of frogs on the railroad tracks stopped the train. The rails were so slick the driving wheels could get no traction."

The old park office on the north side of the tracks opposite the falls is in fact the second depot (minus its canopy). It used to sit on the other side of the tracks and dates likely to 1905. Imagine it's the 1800's and you've packed a picnic for friends and family. You walk to the train depot on North Fourth Street and head to the falls for a relaxing day in the country. Later in the day you catch the eastbound train back to town. Life was good.

The Rambling Editor Looks North

Along with most other Minnesotans, I *like* Governor Pawlenty – he seems like a decent, honest person. But I seldom agree with him about anything. Now here comes the exception. In September Pawlenty called for the state to buy 2,500 acres of prime lakeshore property on Lake Vermilion in St. Louis County north of the Iron Range to create a new state park.

The price is enormous, maybe \$75 million, and the governor – who in the past has squelched many good ideas with his no-new-taxes, tight budget policies – says, “This is a unique opportunity to create a next generation state park on one of Minnesota’s most beautiful and pristine lakes. ...[It] would provide an ‘up north, place at the lake experience’ for all Minnesotans.”

It would do more than that. The land in question is planned for a private development of 150 luxury homesites that would close off five miles of lakeshore. I think too much of Lake Vermilion has been developed already, and the same is true of most of Minnesota’s lakes. This plan, if it can be realized, would not only protect some fine northern lakeshore, but could also maybe begin to restore our traditional respect for good public facilities – parks, roads, schools, and so on.

An extraordinary expenditure for a beautiful new state park would be a fine symbol of the things that a willing state government can do “for all Minnesotans,” as the governor said. I encourage everyone to look into this and let our representatives in St. Paul know what you think.

[The views expressed in the column are the author’s own and do not reflect the position of the Friends of Minneopa organization.]

[Park Manager, from p. 1] lakes system. The diagnostic study (Phase I) was completed in 1997 for the Minneopa Creek watershed and data indicated excessive nutrients, sedimentation and bacteria. After a long delay we are now moving forward to attempt to improve water quality in these lakes, which drain into Minneopa Creek. There will be cost share dollars available for implementation of best management practices such as ditch buffering, tile intake sediment interception, wetland restorations, lake-shore restorations, etc. Our technical advisory committee has met and we are putting the finishing touches on the implementation plan. This effort has many partners including government agencies at all levels, Minnesota State University Mankato Water Resources Center, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Blue Earth County Chapter of Minnesota Pheasants Inc., local land-owners and private individuals. You can do your part by spreading the word and encouraging landowners you know within the drainage system to look into funding for conservation practices. This is our best shot at improving water quality in Minneopa Creek.

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Help Wanted – Newsletter

We need a new editor for the *Minneopa Messenger*. I will be happy to help some lucky volunteer get started, but I have been doing it long enough. It is time for new blood, and someone who likes graphics would be especially good. Call me, Brand Frentz, at the number below.

The Minneopa Messenger, 20499 555 Lane, Mankato MN 56001, is edited by Brand Frentz, who is responsible for any unattributed material. If you have comments or questions or want to submit material, call Brand at 947-3268.