



# From the Panhandle to the Platte

TWO ITINERANT VOLUNTEERS WORK HARD FOR WILDLIFE

By Carl Wolfe



Credit: Rae Ellen Syverson

*Carl Wolfe retired in 2001 from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and now conducts wildlife studies and public outreach in Florida and Nebraska.*

It's a warm, balmy day in November 2012, and I'm starting to feed a small remote camera attached to a 25-foot semi-rigid tube into a gopher tortoise burrow on the St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, an undeveloped barrier island just off the Florida panhandle. As my partner, Rae Ellen Syverson, monitors the camera's images on a screen nearby, I try to recall just how many other critters the literature claims occupy these same burrows. My thoughts are quickly interrupted when Rae Ellen calls, "I see something moving. It's moving toward you!"

Sprawled flat on my stomach, I'm not in a position to move quickly, but as I glance up I see a glossy eastern diamondback rattlesnake exiting the burrow and scrambling for cover in root openings at the burrow entrance.

So ends another unanticipated close encounter in the life of a volunteer wildlifer.



Credit: Rae Ellen Syverson

Retired wildlifer Carl Wolfe measures the mouth of a gopher tortoise burrow in Florida's St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, where Wolfe and his partner, Rae Ellen Syverson, spend a few months each year doing volunteer wildlife research for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

After a 41-year career in research and education with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, I retired in 2001, ready for new adventures. My good fortune was to find a kindred partner in Rae Ellen who, having lost a spouse as I had, was motivated to look for challenging work in new places. With a doctorate in microbiology, she has added a dimension to our collective experience and to our volunteer skills. The work we've found volunteering has simply been a natural extension of our lifetime interests.

## Winter Refuge in Florida

We started our volunteer "careers" at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia. After one winter season spent clearing trails, maintaining elevated walkways, and manning the visitor center desk, however, we realized we were not "swamp people." So, we checked openings at other refuges and found a place at Florida's St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge in the Gulf of Mexico. We knew that location would give us a chance to experience both saltwater and freshwater environments as well as a place to escape the winters in Nebraska for a few months each year. Better yet, the refuge was short on technical staff and needed help on several wildlife projects. Our backgrounds filled the bill.

This winter will mark our fifth season at St. Vincent. Beginning in 2009, we've spent late November through early February working on the island, monitoring a variety of species for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). In addition to our work with gopher tortoises—now a state-designated threatened species—we track and photograph a red wolf breeding pair on the island, run surveys for invasive plant species, and set up wood duck and shorebird nesting areas. Two of our other projects have been especially challenging—and captivating.

**Butterfly Tagging.** When we began coming to St. Vincent, we noticed hundreds of monarch butterflies gathering nectar from the abundant wild rosemary and saltbush plants of the island. Wondering about the fate of these monarchs and their

possible migration options, we researched [Monarch Watch](#), a national program based out of the University of Kansas at Lawrence, which records and tracks tagged monarchs in North America. We attended the program's annual tagging event to learn how to tag and sex monarchs, then began netting and tagging the butterflies on St. Vincent during the 2011-12 season. (I confess that while netting butterflies is very good exercise, it is not a study in grace and agility for senior citizens.)

In all, we tagged some 385 butterflies that season. Unfortunately, drought and summer storms on the island during the 2012-13 season dramatically impacted monarch numbers. Storm surges had destroyed many of the favored saltbush nectaring sites, while the drought and prescribed fires had curtailed normal growth of rosemary. As a result, we found so few monarchs that no tagging was possible. We expect the 2013-14 season to also be bleak. Record low wintering numbers in Mexico coupled with a continuing drought over the south-central states doesn't make for an optimistic outlook. But, we'll be ready with new nets and fresh tags!

**Sambar Deer.** The St. Vincent refuge has a resident population of some 100 or so Sambar deer, a leftover from stocking during the 1900s when the island was a private retreat and game preserve. These deer have been hunted for the past 20 years along with white-tailed deer during designated seasons for primitive hunting methods such as black-powder rifles and archery. Our interest in Sambar deer was ignited when we observed them during our first season on the island. We then learned that no studies had been done on these small elk-sized Asian deer since the mid-1970s.

During the past two volunteer seasons, we've used camera traps to determine if individual males could be identified. After countless hours of video editing, we believe population estimates can be made using this technique. Our colleague Gary White (a fellow TWS member and retired CSU wildlife professor) has been encouraging us to pursue this and even made an offer to do the analysis—strong incentive to carry on. This coming season we will begin a focused study of Sambar deer—just one example of the endless opportunity for study and volunteer work in such a natural setting.



Credit: Rae Ellen Syverson

Rarely spotted or caught on camera, a red wolf peers from the brush of Florida's St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, home to a breeding pair of the endangered wolves. Volunteers help gather radio-tracking data to study the wolves' location and denning status.



Credit: Rae Ellen Syverson

Carl Wolfe retrieves a wood duck box that has broken loose from its mounting pole on the St. Vincent refuge. Keeping these boxes in useable condition is a key to successful wood duck reproduction.



Credit: Rae Ellen Syverson

A male monarch butterfly tagged at the St. Vincent refuge was part of a nationwide study to gather data about the species' population trends and its migration and wintering areas.



Credit: Carl Wolfe

A male Sambar deer on St. Vincent descends from individuals imported in the 1900s for sport hunting. Today, this refuge is the only place in North America where Sambar deer can be hunted in a free-ranging habitat.

Braced for the bitter cold of a Nebraska winter morning, Carl Wolfe and Rae Ellen Syverson leave an observation blind at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary on the Platte River. Here they lead morning and evening tours for visitors who come to view thousands of sandhill cranes and snow geese. "We never tire of watching a spectacle that has no parallel," says Wolfe. "It makes it easy to be a volunteer."



Credit: Lori Potter

## Moving North with Sandhill Cranes

After completing winter work on St. Vincent, we head north in mid-February to begin our second major volunteer effort each year: working with sandhill cranes at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary along the Platte River in central Nebraska. We discovered this opportunity a number of years ago on a crane-watching trip.

At Rowe, our volunteer efforts involve working with people rather than wildlife, though what we do always focuses back on wildlife. The Big Bend area of the Platte sees some 600,000 sandhill cranes and several million snow geese and other waterfowl during the migration period from mid-February through mid-April. Bird watchers and photographers from around the world also migrate to this region during crane season. Some 12,000 of them from every state and 50 countries pass through the

### How to Volunteer

Retired wildlifers who would like to volunteer their skills at National Wildlife Refuges or on other public lands can locate opportunities by visiting the refuges or going to [volunteer.gov](http://volunteer.gov).

doors of Rowe during this eight-week period. We lead groups to early morning and evening blinds to watch the incredible spectacle of birds returning to roost on the river at night or leaving in the morning.

Additionally, we work with groups of students and visitors to help them learn more about sandhill crane life history and ecology, as well as the need for river and wet-meadow habitat management. It is especially rewarding to see how an increased awareness of this migratory spectacle leads to a greater appreciation of wildlife species and the need for better scientific management strategies. As an example, few visitors are aware of the need to maintain vegetation-free sandbars for secure and safe roosting, a never-ending and expensive task for all agencies and NGOs involved in crane management.

As crane numbers begin to thin in late April, our work turns to a more personal bent—restoration and management of a 26-acre riverine tract along the Platte that we consider home. Several projects—such as widening and deepening old river channels, restoration planting of native wet-site and prairie species, and selective removal of invasive red cedar—have taken much of our spare time over the past four years. We hope to eventually achieve maximum diversity of habitat, especially for water birds such as wood duck and herons. The side benefit of providing habitat for turkey, deer, and river otters has been frosting on the cake. We see this “volunteer” effort as a work in progress that will take us many years to complete. The continued learning experiences and the ability to make the land a little more productive for wildlife are the rewards.

In all, our volunteering efforts make only a small difference: the need for larger numbers of willing volunteers to help on wildlife projects is even greater in current times of budget restrictions on both government and private conservation efforts. The need to educate a general population that is more removed from the land as each generation progresses is also vital. Retired natural resource professionals—especially TWS members—can offer much. It simply requires extending a career that has always involved caring about wildlife. And beyond any professional contribution, we have found that working with new species and exploring new technologies and new habitats certainly keeps the aging mind more active. Relief from shoveling snow is not too bad, either! ■