



the Sharp Tale

The newsletter of the Friends of Crex, Inc.
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Fall 2013

Beavers, Where Art Thou?

by Hannah White, Summer Intern

Editor note: Each year Crex Meadows employs 2 or 3 summer interns from Wisconsin colleges and Universities to help with the busy summer schedule of work out in the field, and to work on special projects. This summer we had Hannah White from UW-Steven's Point and Jeff Steen from UW-River Falls. We invited the interns to write an article for us to let us in on what they did this summer. Hannah's article follows, and Jeff's can be found on pages 6-7. Hannah will be returning to Crex Meadows on Sunday, September 15 to give a presentation on her project at our annual Membership Meeting. We hope you can join us!

During my first few weeks as a summer intern at Crex, I acquired my fair share of experience unclogging beaver dams from water-control structures (much to my sheer delight I should add). Soon, it became routine for my fellow Intern, Jeff, and me to unplug Whiskey Creek and Middle North Fork on a weekly basis. Always good to have something you can count on! We became skilled users of the "beaver claw," which is basically a glorified pitchfork used to remove said dams.

It was while hacking away at the concoction of mud and sticks (which possessed a faint yet charming aroma, reminiscent of cow poop) packed up in front of the stoplogs, that I learned my first lesson about beavers—they

are relentless and determined little buggers who will stop at nothing to protect their home! I got to thinking—perhaps while we unplugged Whiskey for the third or fourth time—just how many beavers are there in Crex Meadows? My boss Bob Hanson's witty response was, "A lot." As useful as that information was to me, I still wanted to nail down a number, even if it wasn't exact. And so began my quest to count every single beaver on the 30-some thousand acres that is Crex Meadows. Sounds easy enough, right?

Lucky for me, a fellow by the name of Bruce Kohn (retired wildlife researcher with the Wisconsin DNR) previously conducted a study finding an average of 4.5 beavers per colony. So my plan was to locate all the active beaver lodges I could and then multiply that number by 4.5 to get an estimate of Crex's beaver population. Alright, now we're getting somewhere!

But before we get ahead of ourselves, it wasn't time to start exploring just yet. I began by talking with several members of the Crex crew, guys who have trapped beaver on the property for years, and together we compiled a map of locations where beaver lodges have been present in the past. Now with my treasure map in hand, I set out to find the



Hannah banding geese at Big Butternut Lake ~Photo by Jeff Steen

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lodges for myself!

Truck and kayak were my two exploration methods of choice. Some lodges I could easily spot from the road (without even having to crawl on the roof with binoculars). Take Phantom Lake or Currey Pond for example. You needn't leave the comfort of your vehicle to see these lodges! They are only a few yards off the road, in plain sight. Other lodges took a little more effort. I had to kayak into Lower Hay Creek to discover that mansion of a beaver lodge—which came as no surprise considering the Lower Hay Creek flowage is one of the most chronically dammed. All I have to say on that matter is: Thank God for backhoes!

With all said and done, I counted sixteen lodges and two sites where beavers were in the water but I couldn't find a lodge, making for a grand total of eighteen presumed beaver colonies on Crex. Using Kohn's conversion factor of 4.5 beavers per colony, I estimated the summer 2013 beaver population for Crex Meadows to be eighty-one!

Despite my best efforts to expose these sneaky critters, however, I am sure there are more lodges that I missed (not to mention bank burrows). When I first came to Crex in May, the flowages were wide open water. But by the time late June rolled around and I finally got my ducks in a row to start looking for lodges, the same flowages that were open water a month prior had since transformed into lily pad-covered cattail forests and sedge savannas, making my quest to find beaver lodges all the more challenging.

Complications aside, I saw tons of amazing wildlife and experienced many a Crex sunset. Getting ambushed by two otters that swam under my kayak on Dike 6 was probably the highlight of my beaver-scouting adventures (so cool!) I think it's safe to say there are much worse ways I could have spent my summer. I plan to return to Crex later this fall to count beaver lodges from a plane and possibly find some of the ones I missed!