

Volunteers We Have Known

“Whatever we’re doing, Zeeger is there,” says Maggie Briggs, visitor services manager at Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Maryland. Zeeger de Wilde is a Dutch-born horticulturalist who has been volunteering at refuges on Chesapeake Bay for more than a quarter century. Briggs calculated that he’s up to about 6,000 hours of volunteer service, but he’s never kept a tally.

DeWilde came to North America in 1953, working first as a landscaper in Canada and then in Maryland. He initially came on board as a volunteer to help maintain a butterfly garden at Blackwater Refuge. Now he is perhaps best known as the guide who will guarantee to find eagles during Eagle Prowls in December and March. “It’s not hard to find them,” he says modestly. “Older people know what the eagle stands for; you have to teach the kids now.”

Sometimes birdwatchers on the Eagle Prowl get to see more than just a tiny white head in the distance. De Wilde remembers one prowl when male and female hooked talons in a mating ritual. Another time, a male eagle picked up a fish, carried it into the air and handed it to a female.

After thousands of volunteer hours, De Wilde still speaks enthusiastically about everything that happens on the refuge. “We have three kayak trails at Blackwater and we opened a photo blind at Eastern Neck...we did lots of marsh restoration, including close to 800,000 plus acres of grass on an island that is part of Blackwater Refuge.” He has staffed Friends exhibits at local festivals and zoos, supervised children in nature crafts and taken his turn at the information desk.

Remembering walks with his own parents when he was a child in Holland, de Wilde’s excitement at sharing his love of nature with the public is palpable. “Ever since I retired, I’ve been so busy,” he laughs. Last year, the 76-year old de Wilde put

20,000 miles on his car between his home in Seaford, Delaware, and Blackwater and Eastern Neck, the two refuges where he devotes most of his time.

De Wilde has three grandchildren and two great grandchildren; he recently drove his daughter home to Texas so he could go birding in Oklahoma with a group in which he would be the youngest birder!

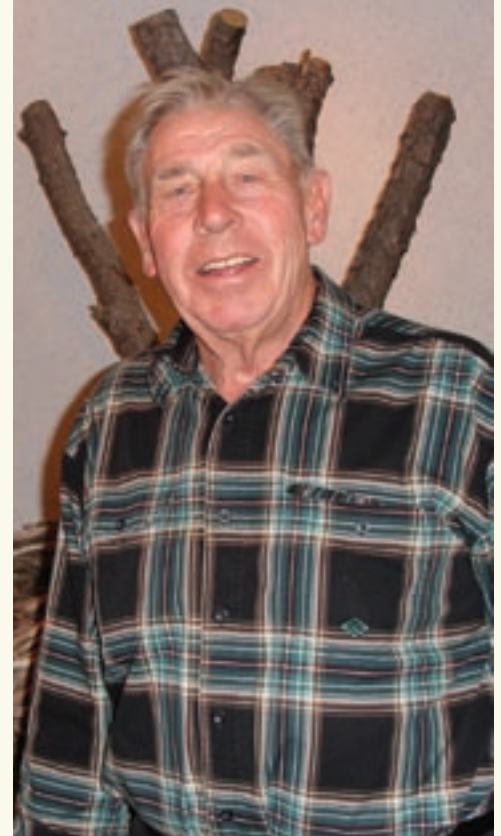
Conservation Heroes

Veteran refuge manager Mendel Stewart has seen his share of outstanding volunteers, people he calls “conservation heroes.” Now project leader of San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Stewart writes, “When I worked at the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex, I learned that through citizen action the Tijuana Slough was essentially saved from becoming a large dredge-and-fill project for residential and commercial development.”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, development plans were underway to convert over 1,000 acres of coastal marsh in the nation’s very southwest corner near the Mexican border into a “nautical community.” Mike McCoy and his wife Patricia were passionately opposed. Their opposition was not always appreciated; the McCoy’s were even shot at one evening after attending a community meeting. Eventually their work led to the creation in 1980 of Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge and its subsequent designation as a Wetland of International Importance.

“I assumed citizen crusaders like these were few and far between,” Stewart writes, “but it was not long after I moved to the San Francisco Bay area that I learned about other seemingly incredible conservation feats.”

Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge would probably not exist if it were not for a handful of individuals who petitioned for a new



Dutch-born horticulturalist Zeeger de Wilde has given nearly 6,000 hours of volunteer service to Blackwater and Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuges. He is best known for his promise to find eagles during his biannual Eagle Prowl. (USFWS)

national wildlife refuge. Led by Phil and Florence LaRiviera, they were successful when Congress established the first “urban” refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System in 1974. Ralph Nobles led the effort to prevent commercial and residential construction on Bair Island within the Don Edwards Refuge.

Stewart says “I may not have had the chance to meet Aldo Leopold or John Muir, but I feel extremely fortunate and proud to know Ralph Nobles, the LaRivieras and the McCoy’s – this generation’s conservation heroes.” ♦

Mendel Stewart, project leader of San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex, contributed to this article.