

NORTH FARMERS VOLUNTEER

Audubon Center: Not Just For The Birds

Yes, there are osprey nests. Yes, there are guided birding walks on Wednesday mornings. Yes, its annual Raptor Weekend (Sept. 2-3 this year) attracts hundreds and hundreds eager to learn about eagles, falcons, owls and hawks.



**Audubon Society
of Rhode Island**

But the Audubon Environmental Education Center next door to North Farm is about much more than things that fly.

The presumed link to our feathered friends is understandable. After all, its namesake, John James Audubon (1785-1851) was renowned as an ornithologist/painter, and his *Birds of America* is still regarded as one of the greatest art books of all time. He's said to have discovered 25 species and 12 subspecies of birds and inspired an entire culture of bird lovers.

The local Center, however, also holds an aquarium, exhibits on local furry mammals, displays that explain how meadows work and even a cutaway life-size model of a Right Whale. There's an art gallery, several classrooms and a bunch of interactive learning tools, mostly aimed at younger audiences. A large part of its success is due to the work of volunteers, like North Farm's Pat Jablonowski.

Pat, a retired high school physics teacher, decided to get involved with the Audubon Center shortly after she (and this reporter) moved into our community nearly four years ago. After enquiring about volunteer opportunities, she and a group of a half-dozen others went through a six-session training course and emerged as Exhibit Naturalists. As a docent at the Center, her main tasks include giving guided tours to visitors, helping with a weekly pre-school program and providing instruction to guests who range from local students to out-of-state tourists. You can catch her at the Center most Thursday mornings, plus at several special events throughout the year.

By Joe Jablonowski

"It's fulfilling to do one-on-one science teaching with people who in many cases weren't even aware of our programs," says Pat Jablonowski. "Besides, I'm learning about local ecology myself." Like, for example, why they're properly called "sea stars" and not "starfish" (they're not fish, but rather echinoderms). Or that whales have three stomachs. Or that the great horned owl's utter lack of smell allows it to hunt skunks.

Plus, you can't beat the commute, she says.

The Education Center sits atop the 28-acre McIntosh Wildlife Refuge, the property abutting the North Farm property line.

The land includes specific habitats: woodland, meadow, freshwater marsh, saltwater marsh and the bay, and all are detailed in exhibits within the Center. The building also includes a nature shop and space that can be rented for birthday parties, corporate events, etc., and it hosts a summer camp.

The Bristol site is just one of several throughout the state that are owned and run by the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, founded more than 100 years ago, originally to protect birds from the feather trade. The nonprofit organization, headquartered in Smithfield, R.I., owns and protects 15 other wildlife refuges/woodlands open to the public, including a 50-acre parcel in Tiverton and a pristine marsh in Touisset.

With all those locations and programs, opportunities for volunteering abound. A recent newsletter sought help caring for turtles and salamanders, removing an old boardwalk, monitoring ospreys and counting butterflies.

To donate some of your time to



Audubon Center volunteer Pat Jablonowski loves to show visitors small fry that will grow to tempt bass fishers on Narraganset Bay.

the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, contact director of volunteer services Jonathan Scoones at 401-949-5454. For more info, go to asri.org.



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