

Wildlife preservation

A man's vision survives

*9,000 acres at Sandhill
continue to be fruitful*

By RON LEYS
Journal outdoor editor

Babcock, Wis. — These may be the dog days of summer, but wild creatures are thriving and active on the Sandhill Wildlife Area in central Wisconsin.

An almost-grown deer fawn with fading spots got up from its bed in the shade of an oak tree last week as a car approached and popped, but it was not about to go far. It lay down again under a sapling and stretched its head on the ground to disappear in the grass. But curiosity got the best of this little deer and its head popped up and its ears fanned out to check out the pair of strangers.

A great horned owl, disturbed from its daytime snooze, sailed low over a gravel road and then swooped upward to perch in a big tree.

A mother wood duck peeped stern instructions to her brood of four big ducklings to hide in long grass along an old drainage ditch, then boldly swam to lead a stranger with a camera away from her young ones until it was safe for her to take to her wings.

A flying squirrel huddled with her litter of kits when the stranger opened a side of the bluebird house that she had claimed. The stranger softly closed the door, and the squirrel pressed her eye to the entrance hole to watch him walk away.

A pair of sandhill cranes sent their rolling trills out across a wetland, proclaiming the area as their private property. They heard no argument.

A half-dozen buffaloes switched their tails to ward off a few flies as

Sandhill/Some changes have taken place

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they chewed their cuds in a shady place just inside the 200-acre enclosure that is home to a herd of about 20 of what were the biggest animals in Wisconsin when Europeans first arrived.

Encroaching brush in the buffalo enclosure is being chemically treated and burned to restore a prairie of the type that once provided homes to many small herds of buffalo in Wisconsin, said Dick Thiel, a Department of Natural Resources staffer who was giving a reporter a tour of the Sandhill Wildlife Area.

Although human visitors are not allowed inside the buffalo impoundment, they are free to roam anywhere else in the 9,000-plus acres of Sandhill.

This area of oak savanna, birch and popple forest, brush, marshland, wildflowers and wildlife is a living, breathing memorial to the son of Wallace Grange, who bought up more than 9,000 acres of mostly abandoned, cut over, burned over and farmed over land during the Depression of the 1930s.

Grange built a 7-foot-high, deer-proof fence around his land and named it the Sandhill Game Farm. He derived some income from the property, selling deer for the restaurant venison trade and for restocking in parts of the south-east United States where deer had been eliminated.

But it is obvious from the location of Grange's cabin retreat, on a point of dry land that thrusts into a wetland used by many creatures, that he loved the look and the sounds of the place.

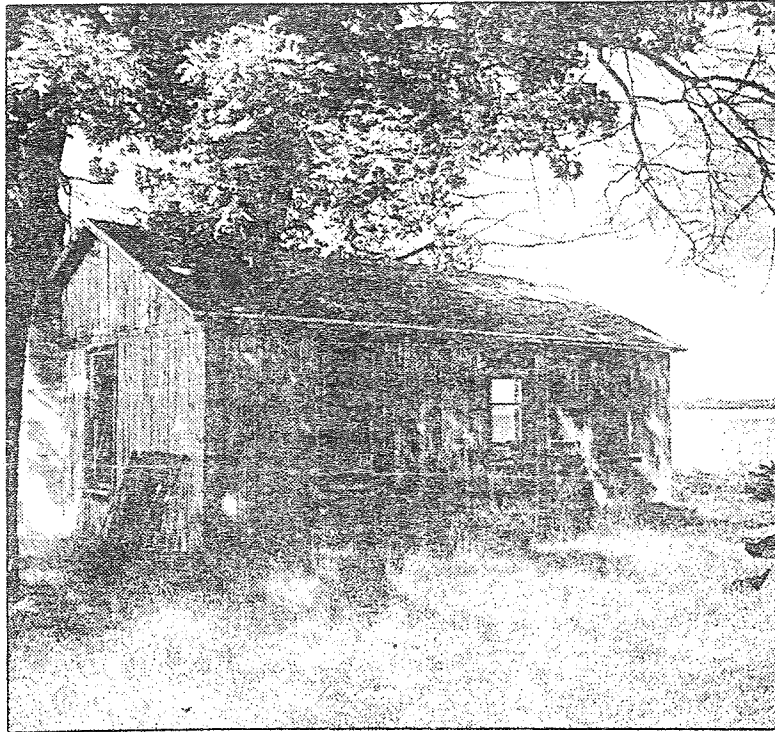
WISCONSIN BOUGHT THE LAND

In 1962, Grange sold the land to the State of Wisconsin, with the understanding that it would be used as a wildlife demonstration area. And so it has been.

But over the years, a change has taken place.

Sandhill is still best known as the place where deer hunting experiments take place, including one in the 1970s in which hunters were allowed to shoot every last deer within the deer fence.

The deer came back, leaking in



WALLACE GRANGE'S CABIN sits on dry land that thrusts into a wetland.

carefully managed through selective hunting, so a high percentage of the deer are fully mature bucks with impressive spreads of antlers. Thousands of deer hunters each year apply for the few score hunting permits available. Short and tightly managed hunts are also held for small game species.

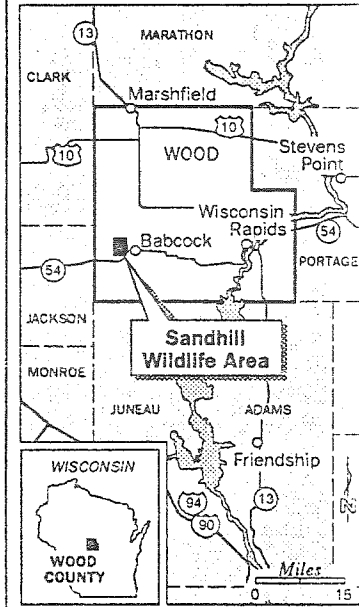
But Sandhill has become even more popular with people who just want to take a tour, enjoy the scenery, perhaps see some wild animals, take some photos and experience a truly wild place.

Sandhill is financially supported by money raised through Wisconsin hunting and fishing license sales and federal taxes on sporting equipment, but as many as 95% of its visitors come only to look. An informal registration system that asks whether visitors possess hunting licenses indicates that about half are hunters.

On some federal wildlife properties, visitors who don't possess hunting licenses are required to pay admission fees, but no such system has been discussed for Sandhill.

Vehicles are required to stay on a 14-mile gravel road known as the Trumpeter Trail, but humans on foot are as free to roam Sandhill as the deer and the birds. Aside from a few picnic tables, there has been no development. There is only the world of nature.

Sandhill Wildlife Area



Journal photo by Ron Leys

Journal graphic