

Walk for the Wild: two successful events!

At the McNary National Wildlife Refuge, October 7, 2023

What could be more appealing to local hikers and “friends” than to be invited into a unit of the McNary National Wildlife Refuge closed year round to all but bonafide hunters during season. And to make the experience ever so much more enriching, Mike Denny, naturalist extraordinaire, lead the Walk for the Wild on the morning of October 7, 2023.

Fifteen eager hikers met in front of a table, at the start of the Walk, set up by Friends of Mid Columbia National Wildlife Refuges. The table offered treats and snacks to take on the walk, and a huge jug of ice water, along with the Friends brochure.



Participants at start of walk.



Map of loop walk at McNary NWR (normally closed to non-hunting public)

Our walk was a 4 mile loop walk in the shrub-steppe habitat, near waterfowl-rich sloughs, with some far reaching views of farmlands and rolling Ice Age flood terrain. However, although 4 miles might only take 2 hours to cover, we stayed on the trail much longer as Mike Denny captured our attention by describing everything big and small, from the local flora to a tiny hole in the ground (ground nesting bees). Nothing natural escaped Mike’s interpretive eye.



Mike Denny - an outstanding naturalist!



Mike, reminding us not to just look, but to observe!

Other hikers walked the route on other days, and although Friends were not able to count them, we know from the photos submitted to our monthly Photo Gallery, that the loop trail was enjoyed during the week's event.



Also seen on the trail... Shaggy Mane.

At the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge, October 14, 2023

Our second Walk for the Wild event took place a week later, at the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge just outside of Othello, WA. This is a semi-remote location in the eastern part of the state approximately 100 miles west of Spokane. The area is characterized by vast expanses of basalt cliffs, dry riverbeds and water-filled 'kolks', or potholes formed when the waters of glacial Lake Missoula broke through their ice dam multiple times 2,500 years ago, scouring the Columbia Basin with flow rates of up to 65 miles per hour.

US Fish and Wildlife Service ranger Breanna 'Bre' Hild led the walk with support by Friends member and botanist extraordinaire Ernie Crediford. Participants started at the trailhead to Rimrock Lake, then followed a narrow winding path through wetlands, sage steppe and up to a scenic overlook offering views of distant horizons that included the Cascade Crest.



Enjoying the views from an overlook

The tour coincided with the 2023 annual eclipse. Clear skies and solar safe glasses let participants view a 75% obscuration of the sun that changed the bright white light over the area to dark, orange, with a slight but perceptible drop in temperature. Closer to the ground walkers learned about hexagonal -shaped basalt outcroppings and the many forbs and wildflowers common throughout the Columbia refuge. Hunter, a FWS service biologist who participated on the hike, spotted a Loggerhead Shrike, or 'butcher bird', and described how it captures small insects and reptiles, pinning them to natural thorns or barb wire to dry before eating them. And what was first thought by participants to be orange and white trail markers spray - painted on rocks were identified as scat from local packrat colonies. Ernie pointed out that the bright orange borders surrounding the rectangular white droppings were actually lichens living on the residual nutrients in the mouse droppings.



Not a trail marker! Mouse droppings (white) and lichen.



Walking back to the trailhead

Enthusiasm at the end of the walk was high enough that participants asked if Bre and our Friends group could schedule another this spring when our local sage steppe habitat puts on a fuller display of blooms and when bird migrants would be more abundant. Many thanks to local Mid-Columbia River FWS staff Bre, Trina and Hunter for putting on a great event!