

Nesting platforms are built to attract big birds

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February 2, 2010

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Instead of a "Field of Dreams," it's a "Wetland of Dreams" at Almond Marsh near Grayslake, where more than two dozen volunteers erected heron nesting platforms Monday.

And if you build it, the herons and egrets and cormorants will come, which the Lake County Forest Preserve District and the Lake-Cook Chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society found out last year with their first experimental platform.

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Lake County Audubon Society board member Glen Moss of Libertyville (left), Mike Brehmer of Libertyville, Clint Meyer of Oswego and Lake County Forest Preserve District biologist Tim Preuss raise a nesting platform in Almond Marsh near Grayslake to attract great blue herons. (Ryan Pagelow/News-Sun)

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A heron nests atop the tripod placed in the marsh to attract them to do so, the decaying trees surrounding the tripod are falling away: they had formerly served as nesting support the birds favored.

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That platform was one of the first to have a pair of nesting blue herons that successfully hatched chicks. The nesting birds are one highlight of what forest preserve officials call "a significant marsh and sedge meadow complex." The 100-plus acres have the added protection of being an Illinois Nature Preserve site.

Chris Geiselhart, president of the Audubon chapter, said that by the end of the week they hope to have 11 new platforms erected in the deadwood marsh.

"It's funny because we had five done by lunch this time, and last year we had one done by lunchtime," she said.

At the end of Monday the volunteers and some forest preserve workers had erected eight, leaving three to do today.

Necessity was the mother of this invention. The number of natural places to nest had declined by half.

"They (herons) are not endangered in Illinois, but we have been losing their nesting sites," Geiselhart said. "We are playing Mother Nature" in the effort to keep the birds nesting here.

Last year, the Audubon unit manned the site so rookie birders could come to the rookery and see the heron chicks in nests through spotting scopes provided by the club.

Geiselhart said they hope to include more signage in the future "so people can learn more about these majestic birds."

Paul Klonowski of Gurnee was accompanied by his daughter, Marie, a Woodlands Elementary eighth-grader.

"She just loves this type of stuff. She loves animals, and anything to do with an animal she wants to be a part of it," he said. Klonowski said Marie is eyeing a career as a veterinarian.

Marie had helped weave branches onto the platform, giving the herons a head start on spring nest-building. Later, she was the official pipe wrench holder for one work crew.

"For science we have to do a current events project, so I'm going to use this," she said.

She has worked with the water trail keepers and river cleanups and the summer camps put on by the forest preserve district.

"I really like helping out at the forest preserve," she said.

And the herons will like it, too. Build it and they will come.

heron Haven at Almond Marsh

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