

Immersed in the Natural World: Necedah, Wisconsin

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Hilary Wind '14 among the group the Lake Forest students in Necedah

Watching cranes soar through the sky, walking through acres of oak savannah, and trekking through frigid environments, I quickly discovered that environmental studies courses at Lake Forest College are not your typical classes. The Environmental Studies Department takes students exactly where they should be—outside exploring and learning about the natural world around us. My class and I explored Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin one early April for my introduction to environmental studies course. Professor Jeff Sundberg and Professor Benjamin Goluboff, each of whom brings a unique perspective to the field of environmental studies, teach the course jointly.

The Necedah National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1939, is a 44,000 acre ecosystem currently maintained by the US Fish and Wildlife Service¹. Necedah is home to a wide variety of ecosystems, including sedge meadow, savanna, and pine-oak forest. The Wildlife Refuge is commonly known as the Central Wisconsin Swamp, which was carved out over ten thousand years ago as a result of a retreating glacier.¹ Before embarking on our journey through the Refuge, we prepared for our trip by reading a novel titled *Crane Music* by Paul Johnsguard, which familiarized us with the Sandhill Crane and Whooping Crane. Learning about the cranes and other wildlife before the trip got me really excited to see them in their natural habitat!

Necedah is home to distinctive wildlife, making it an ideal destination for our class. The Karner blue butterfly, Blanding's turtle, and the gray wolf, all endangered species, can be found in Necedah.¹ Necedah also serves as an introduction site for an experimental, eastern population of Whooping Cranes. Necedah is exclusive in being one of the only places to witness and appreciate Whooping Cranes, which are a critically endangered species. Today, there are fewer than 250 Whooping Cranes remaining on our planet, a number that is higher than previous years but still terribly low. Additionally, Necedah consistently works to restore oak

savanna habitat, provide refuge for endangered species, and offer a breeding and migration habitat for numerous birds. Necedah is an important place to learn and appreciate much of the unique wildlife and ecosystems associated with this region of North America.

Getting up close with interesting wildlife such as Trumpeter Swans, Whooping Cranes, Sandhill Cranes, eagles, porcupines, snakes, frogs, and many rare birds in their native habitat was definitely the most memorable part of the trip. The Sandhill Cranes and Whooping Cranes, as well as the eagles, were absolutely majestic upon taking flight. I had never seen a Whooping Crane before, and watching it soar above me was exhilarating! Also, seeing porcupines up in trees was really surprising because I previously had no idea that they lived in trees. Professor Jeff Sundberg and Professor Ben Goluboff enlightened us with information about many of the rare birds we observed. Professor Sean Menke, who joined us on the trip, taught us about the reptiles and amphibians we encountered. Additionally, every student in the class taught one another something about the unique ecosystem found in Necedah. Each student was assigned one or two species of plant or animal, and upon encountering it, he or she would teach it to the rest of the class. It was enlightening to see both professors and students actively teaching and learning from each other. Another highlight of the trip was spending quality time outside of the classroom. It is one thing to read about a place; it is another thing entirely to be immersed in a place, taking in the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings. Despite the cold, I was elated to see and learn from such a beautiful place with the rest of the class! Finally, we had a class discussion on the definition of "wilderness" and learned that almost everyone had a different definition of the word. Our different backgrounds allow us to perceive nature in very different ways, as everyone has a unique connection to the natural world.

Spending a weekend in the Central Wisconsin Swamp was incredibly fun and informative, despite the bitter cold! Necedah is a unique place to visit and is widely visited by birders, students, and the general population. The Environmental Studies Department takes pride in taking students to unique destinations while always stressing the fact that studying the environment requires a highly interdisciplinary mindset. Exploring Necedah helped to reinforce this concept while being immersed in the irreplaceable environment. Since this trip, I have embarked on additional environmental studies trips, and I look forward to going on more in the future. Taking an environmental studies course at Lake Forest College, without a doubt, provided me with a new and exciting interdisciplinary experience.

References:

¹<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/necedah/>

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