



A bullfrog in Muddy Bog, a favorite wetland at Unexpected Wildlife Refuge.



Miller Pond, one of the major wetlands at Unexpected Wildlife Refuge.

Unexpected Wildlife Refuge:

Haven for South Jersey Wildlife

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The co-founders of the Refuge were my parents, Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci and Cavit Buyukmihci. Hope was an impassioned naturalist, artist, activist and writer. Her compassion was infectious and Cavit, a metallurgical engineer, soon fully embraced an ethic of reverence for all life.

One of my most vivid childhood memories is finding a snake in the woods surrounding our home in South Jersey, to which we had just moved by way of Turkey. I desperately wanted to catch and closely observe this individual, but my father was concerned for my “safety.” My mother, however, knew that most snakes were harmless to people and overruled my father. Thus began our family’s journey into wildlife, involving much education, revelation and self-sacrifice. We became known as

the people who were “animal nuts” and who vigorously opposed hunting and trapping.

For years, my mother yearned to spend more time observing and drawing wildlife. She and my father began a search for a small plot of natural or near-natural land which my mother could use as her studio. In 1961, they purchased an 85-acre tract in Buena Vista Township, located in the Pinelands. Mostly wooded swampland, the property included a rustic cabin, an old barn, and a stream which beavers had dammed to create a large pond where once a cranberry bog had existed. It was an ideal place for my mother to get intimately involved with wildlife. We soon decided that it was also a wonderful place to live, made modest improvements to the cabin, and moved there permanently.



Spicebush swallowtail butterfly near a trail.

Hope and Cavit recognized early on that the biggest threat to wildlife involves loss of habitat through destruction or fragmentation. As a result, they donated their land and home to begin Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, named after Unexpected Road, off which it is situated. The Refuge became incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1968 and received federal tax-exempt status in 1969.

Since then, the Refuge has added other parcels of contiguous land so that today it encompasses 767 acres of vital habitat comprising fields, wetlands, forests, bogs, and standing ponds. This provides living opportunities for hundreds of species of amphibians, birds, insects, mammals, reptiles and other animals, and plants. Some are considered biologically threatened (Pine Barrens tree frog), endangered (red-bellied turtle), or scarce (southern twayblade orchid and wild lupine, the latter which is the only known host plant for the nationally endangered butterfly, the Karner blue).

From its inception, the Refuge has remained undeveloped and wild. It is one of the few places where wildlife are considered the primary benefactors with human interests a distant second. Everything we do is geared toward minimal intervention so that animals (and plants) can exist consistent with their needs and desires. There is no manipulation of habitat to encourage one species over another, no artificial feeding or housing. Wildlife are essentially in complete control of their destiny. Trails for human access are kept to a minimum in number and scope, and primarily so that this relatively vast area can be patrolled to keep out people intent on destroying wildlife. The trails also serve to allow visitors to tour and view this diverse habitat with a minimum of disturbance to the inhabitants. No boating or other

access into any of the ponds or lakes is permitted. Hunting, fishing, trapping, and other consumptive exploitation have always been prohibited. Peaceful coexistence with wildlife is a key part of wildlife and habitat protection and the Refuge extends its influence beyond its borders to help the public achieve this principle elsewhere.

In order to help wildlife here and outside our borders, we provide educational tours of the Refuge, as well as presentations to schools and others groups, always striving to help resolve human-wildlife conflicts peacefully and without detriment to the wildlife. In particular, we work with individuals and municipalities within the state and beyond to educate people on ways to live in harmony with wildlife who may be perceived as causing problems. Our most successful efforts have been in protecting resident beaver families from extirpation when people were concerned about trees and flooding.

Managing a wildlife refuge on land formerly used by local people and others for fishing, hunting, and trapping for decades was not easy. We struggled for many years to “teach” those people that this type of exploitation was no longer allowed. For a while, trespassing to fish, hunt, and trap occurred regularly. I vividly remember encounters with hunters during which heated words were exchanged and, in at least two situations, our lives were threatened verbally and by the discharge of a firearm. I am grateful that those early days of strife appear to have diminished and, today, trespassing to destroy wildlife is kept in check by peaceful patrolling and education.

We also became educated by our interaction with others. When we asked one hunter why he chose to hunt and kill animals, he replied by asking if we ate cows or chickens. When we answered truthfully that we did, the hunter said that the deer and quail he killed were



Aerial view of main pond and surrounds. Photograph courtesy Cliff Compton.

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Delicate dragonfly poised near the edge of the main pond.



Common bog violet.



Black racer near one of the trails.



Wild turkeys who “took” their own photo via trail camera.

his “cows and chickens.” This exchange was one of the important experiences that made us realize that personal choices in food and fiber were critical to not only being morally consistent on a personal level, but also in being credible to those who exploited and killed animals for

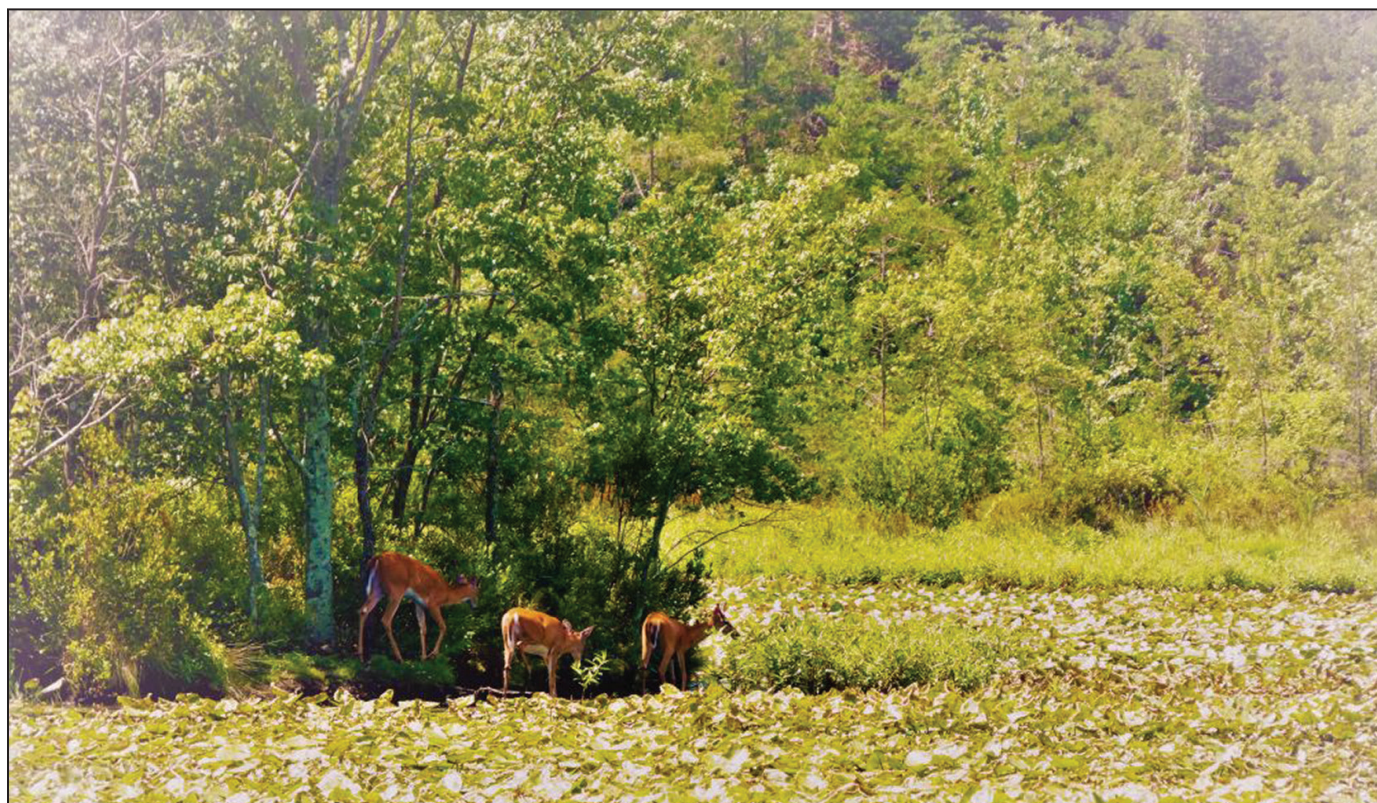
any purpose regardless of species. We asked ourselves the question of why a cow’s life was any less important than that of the deer we were protecting and found the answer to be exceedingly simple: life and being able to pursue one’s interests were equally important *to the*



Beaver eating a water lily in the main pond.



Family of Canada geese in the main pond.



White-tailed deer spending time on one of several islands in the main pond.

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individual regardless of species. We realized that one cannot effectively advocate for the protection of wildlife without also refraining from exploiting animals, not only those who are held in captivity to provide food and fiber for people, but also in all areas of human activity. We discontinued eating animals and soon thereafter embraced veganism as a way of life.

Although the Refuge charter did not address the issue of veganism, we are aware that this is a pivotal issue. We recognize that being a vegan because one is concerned about others who share this planet with us extends beyond just dietary choices. It governs everything we do, all the choices we make each day, in order to minimize our negative impact on all animals. We also are aware that a vegan diet and choice of clothing are superior, not only because of the direct impact on other animals, but also because of the detrimental effects that animal-based food and fiber have on the environment and all who inhabit this earth. In addition to the suffering and death inflicted on the animals raised for human consumption, there are other issues such as air and water pollution, destruction of wildlife to protect livestock, destruction of habitat due to livestock grazing and so forth.

Volunteers have played an important part in keeping the Refuge safe and accessible for educational purposes. Humane-minded individuals have helped us patrol the borders during so-called hunting seasons in order to deter hunters from encroaching on animals in the Refuge. Often freezing temperatures and difficult terrain make their efforts a true labor of love. Young volunteers from groups like the Boy Scouts and YMCA have given their time in maintaining some of the trails and signs. Each year, people spend a day with us on or around Earth Day, clearing trash from various locations that border public land.

Cavit died July 25, 1987, shortly after he had retired with the plan of spending more time protecting the Refuge and becoming more involved in the cause of animal protection. Hope continued to run the Refuge with the help of dedicated volunteers, supported entirely by private donations from visitors. She died June 20, 2001. Although these two stalwart and dedicated people no longer are here, their legacy and message of compassion for all life continue unabated. Stewardship of the Refuge remains in the capable hands of the Council of Trustees,



Juvenile hog-nosed snake assuming a threatening pose to ward off danger;
One of the many swampy areas of forest;
The colorful purple turkey-tail fungus;
A resident river otter, "caught" by a trail camera.

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committed to providing a home to all wildlife—animals and plants—native to the region. The Refuge has always been frugal in its management, never having more than one paid employee. The latter is a manager, living on-site and providing a positive presence throughout the year. Extensive use of volunteers has kept operating costs to a minimum. Nevertheless, we are always in need of funds and volunteers and urge people to participate in whatever way they can. Please visit our Web site to learn more about us and for ways to provide support.

(<http://unexpectedwildliferefuge.org/>)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Buyukmihci received his veterinary medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania and has spent most of his adult life working on animal protection issues. He is currently Emeritus Professor of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California-Davis and resides in the United Kingdom with his wife and rescued chickens and dogs.



Main pond at height of summer. Photograph courtesy of Dave Sauder (a Refuge Trustee).