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Finding the 'Unexpected' in South Jersey

by [Kevin Riordan](#), Posted: February 28, 2016



Veronica Van Hof's nearest neighbors are ducks, beavers, Pine Barrens tree frogs, and nearly 180 other species of birds, mammals, and reptiles. And she watches over them all.

"Black ducks, mallards, hooded mergansers, and of course the Canada geese were here this morning when I walked outside with my tea," says Van Hof, handing me a cup.

I need it; finding the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge is not easy, and the road (more like a potholed path) that meanders through the woods is challenging for a Honda Civic. It's wonderful just to stand here looking at a silvery stretch of Main Pond.

"The ducks are all starting to pair up," continues my host, whose enthusiasm I instantly find contagious. "So are the wild turkeys. I watched a tom the other day; he was drumming, and his tail was out, and the girls were having a fit."

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In November, Van Hof, 42, started work as resident director of the private 767-acre refuge. The expanse of pine forests, white cedar swamps, and wonderfully wild Pinelands ecosystems includes portions of Franklin Township and Buena Vista Township in Gloucester and Atlantic Counties. The refuge is open by appointment only (unexpectedwildliferefuge.org).

"It's a dream job," says Van Hof, who left her Northeastern Pennsylvania newspaper career to study at Keystone College. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in wildlife biology last May; a friend's email alerted her to the job opening at the refuge.

"I do everything," she adds. "Trail maintenance, tours, all the public relations. I had to rebuild all of the boardwalks and install trail cameras. I do donor outreach."

The refuge was founded in 1961 by husband-and-wife naturalists Cavit and Hope Buyukmihci, who raised three children there and ran programs for students and other visitors during an era when environmental education was a novelty.

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"My parents recognized that the most important thing you can do for wildlife is to secure and protect habitat from human development and exploitation," their son Nedim C. Buyukmihci, 68, a retired veterinarian, says via email from his home in the United Kingdom.

The Buyukmihcis also were big fans of beavers - a refuge mascot named "Chopper" had a private tunnel entrance to their cabin - and they founded an activist group called Beaver Defenders.

Protecting those ever-busy but often-maligned critters remains a core mission of the refuge; Van Hof had barely begun work when she jumped feet first into a grassroots effort to prevent the lethal trapping of beavers in the Ocean County township of Toms River.

The beavers were active in the Lake Placid neighborhood, upsetting some nearby (human) residents. The animals were trapped, but Van Hof says the relationships and connections she was able to make with other naturalists and animal-rights supporters were invaluable.

"I'm doing more public outreach," says the resident director, who posts regular updates and evocative photos to the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge page on Facebook.

"But we're walking a very fine line," she adds. "We don't want hordes of people walking through here. The refuge exists for the animals."

The vision of the Buyukmihcis - Cavit died in 1987, his wife in 2001 - still guides the refuge, where many visitors remember the couple and "are like family," Van Hof says.

Nedim, who heads the refuge's Council of Trustees, describes Van Hof as an "ideal" choice for resident director.

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"Veronica understands that protecting wildlife means 'hands-off' and habitat protection, as well as personal ethical consistency," he says. "Like us Trustees, she embraces veganism because she knows that you cannot advocate for wildlife while exploiting other animals who are fundamentally no different."

Buyukmihci's maternal grandfather was the noted bird illustrator and author Edmund J. Sawyer, some of whose work can be found at the refuge. On the day I visit, Van Hof's boyfriend, Philadelphia comic-book artist John Dallaire, is helping her organize the collection so it can be archived. Van Hof also is organizing a cache of photos taken by Hope Buyukmihci.

"Stuff is just in stacks," she says.

There's certainly no shortage of work to be done at the refuge - which is why volunteers like Mary Ann Gurka and Zach Bornyas are essential.

Gurka, a 63-year-old Atlantic City table-game supervisor who lives in Berlin Borough, regularly participates in deer patrol duty at the refuge during "shotgun season" to prevent hunters from trespassing. "I've done it every year since 1988 and I've never really had a confrontation," she says, describing the refuge as "probably the most beautiful place I've ever seen."

And Bornyas, 17, a member of Cherry Hill's Troop 8, is working on his Eagle Scout project at the refuge. He organized a group of more than 15 volunteers to clean up a mile-long loop called "Joe's Trail," named for beloved local outdoorsman Joseph N. Trujillo, who died in 2009.

"The refuge," he observes, "is a really cool place."

Indeed. The distinctive character of this landscape, just minutes from Wawa and other roadside South Jersey staples, stays with me even while I'm driving home amid the daredevils of Route 55.

Says Van Hof: "I feel so centered being here, helping preserve what little wild land we have left in this state. I feel incredibly fortunate. And I feel an immense responsibility."

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