

Great River Road Interpretive Center Application

Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Visitor Center, Onalaska, Wisconsin
N5727 County Road Z, Onalaska, WI 54650

1. What story does your institution tell about the Mississippi River as part of its regular daily visitor experience? How does it relate to the themes for interpretation which are attached? Why do you feel that this significant aspect or relationship to the river is presented at a high level of quality? Describe the quality of the visit your guests receive.



The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge (Refuge) was established in 1924 by Congressional legislation through the Upper Mississippi River Wild Life and Fish Act. The Act was passed as a result of work by avid angler and business owner Will Dilg, who along with a host of others were concerned about plans to create agricultural levee districts throughout the Upper Mississippi River. Dilg and his colleagues were able to successfully identify to Congress the urgent need for federal protection in this area and ultimately were responsible for what is now over 240,000 acres of federally protected lands and waters along and on the Mississippi River in the states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois.

This Act authorized acquisition of lands for various refuge purposes, including: “(a) as a refuge and breeding place for migratory birds... (b) ... as a refuge and breeding place for other wild birds, game animals, fur-bearing animals, and for the conservation of wild flowers and aquatic plants, and (c) ...as a refuge and breeding place for fish and other aquatic animal life” (43 Stat 650, dated June 7, 1924).

Managed as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Refuge is one of 570 National Wildlife Refuge units found across the United States. The Refuge begins near Reads Landing, MN at the confluence of the Chippewa River in Wisconsin for 261 river miles, with its Southern terminus near Princeton, Iowa just north of Lock and Dam 14.

The Refuge is broken into four administrative units, Winona District (Pools 4 – 6), La Crosse District (Pools 7-8), McGregor District (Pools 9-11), and the Savanna District (Pools 12-14). The primary visitor center for the Refuge is centrally located in the La Crosse District in Onalaska, WI on a nearly 800 acre tract of land known as Brice Prairie.



By nature of who we are and what we do, there are numerous ways that our Visitor Center offers Mississippi River related experiences through our exhibits, programming, and our location. We naturally tie into all the themes of the GRR because we manage and protect the habitat and resources of this national treasure, the Mississippi River. Our priority is to welcome and orient visitors when they visit a National Wildlife Refuge. We strive to make a connection between the visitor and the resource (the Mississippi River) to encourage visitors to care about the River and want to continue to protect it for future generations. The habitats, for which we are stewards, are identified in our exhibits and programming and clearly identify how the River is a ribbon of life that sustains those habitats and the wildlife, fish, and plants that depend on them. Our exhibits also clearly identify the history and significance of the area and how it has changed over time both by humans and human influence but also due to natural changes. We show historical and cultural uses of the River by Indigenous People, impacts of human need such as navigation, and restoration of the River to continue to provide sustainable habitats for wildlife and provide recreational opportunities for visitors. We explain how the River and the Refuge have benefitted local communities and users of these amazing resources and how they are recognized throughout the world.



Our Visitor Center meets national standards set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for visitor experience and quality of information shared and presented through programming and/or exhibits. Our staff are highly trained in environmental education and interpretation and ensure each visitor has a quality experience not only in the Visitor Center, but also on our grounds with walking trails, scenic overlooks and on our Refuge lands.

2. What is the length of stay for the typical visitor experience at your institution? Please provide what you consider an average time, what you consider a short stay and what you consider a long stay for regular attendance.

Visitors typically spend about 20-30 minutes exploring our visitor center. We have a short 6-minute film that gives an overview of the Refuge and a variety of exhibits interpreting the River and the wildlife. A short visit would include a chat with a volunteer or staff member, a stroll through the exhibit hall and a visit to the Friends Nature Store. A visit for someone who reads all the exhibits and/or spends a long time in our Friends nature store could take about an hour. For a visitor who takes advantage of our self-guided tours inside and outside on the paved and gravel trails, visiting the overlook viewing Pool 7 (Lake Onalaska) could take up to 3 hours. Visitors can also check out

backpacks with nature guides, binoculars, and other equipment to truly enjoy everything our Refuge has to offer on this site. Spotting scopes are mounted at the overlook and provide the opportunity for prime viewing of waterfowl, geese, swans, and Bald Eagles. Wintertime experiences are also equally enjoyable with the beautiful snowy landscapes and winter scenes on the river providing a new perspective from the other seasons. Refuge Rangers and volunteers are well versed in local attractions and are happy to answer questions visitors may have, regardless of the topic. Visitors can explore the center and grounds at their leisure. Many visitors enjoy a picnic during their visit on a nice day. The restored prairie on this site provides amazing seasonal experiences with wildflowers and other native pollinator plants in bloom throughout the growing season. Visitors can also pick up pool maps that show Refuge lands and access points on each Pool (Pools 4-14) and other interpretive materials including the Explore Wisconsin and Drive the Great River Road maps and booklets. In addition, visitors can purchase the America the Beautiful passes that allow access to participating Federal lands. Visitors can also access information about hunting and fishing regulations and opportunities as well as canoe/kayak trail maps and other conservation-oriented recreation information.



3. What educational or interpretive programs beyond exhibits do you conduct that interpret the Mississippi River or some significant aspect or relationship to the river?



We conduct a number of Environmental Educational programs throughout the year all which directly tie to the River since that is the resource we manage. We have active partnerships with school groups who visit the Refuge and visitor center and participate in programming that meets their curriculum. Environmental Education partnerships with local school districts include regular and routine visits by those partner schools and trainings that are offered to teachers. Meetings are conducted ahead of the school year to identify curriculum

goals and programming is adapted as needed. Students engage in nature journaling with each visit but also learn about life science and conservation, and those topics are woven into STEM instruction as well. Food webs, life, water and chemical cycles, natural history of species, water quality, animal and plant identification are all common components of our environmental education programming. Goals of this program are to introduce students the Refuge and help them understand and appreciate the benefits of having this national resource in their area, introduce them to hands on learning, and instill in them a sense of wonder and appreciation of the natural world. We also want to help them attribute all those things and more to their required school curriculum which allows us to double the value of the learning.

In addition, we offer interpretive programs throughout the year such as bird walks, prairie walks to the overlook, Duck ID, geology of the Driftless Area, floodplain forests, etc. Each of those activities



focus on conservation and tie those items to the MS River and the surrounding areas. The center also expands interpretation to the national level since the center represents a single unit of federal conservation lands that are managed as a part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. In that vein, there are interpretive exhibits for migratory flyways across the country, highlighting the MS Flyway but also discussing the other 3 flyways, as well as maps showing the entire National Wildlife Refuge System. Interpretive exhibits also focus on history of the area, indigenous groups who used the area, what the area looked like pre-lock and dam, what restoration activities have occurred and how these lands and waters are managed in present day. There are touch areas for visitors to touch and feel natural objects, there are taxidermied specimens that give perspective for the size and stature of the wildlife and fish that occur on the Refuge. There is a heavy focus on wetlands with an in-floor wetland diorama which is a visitor favorite and immediate draw

to individuals once they enter the exhibit space.

Last year we led programs to over 1,500 students and over 1,000 participants in interpretive programs. The center has a large multi-purpose room for programs and activities, and it is equipped with wi-fi and a projector and multimedia components for presentations and meetings. Local conservation groups can also reserve the room for programming and our Friends group also hosts programs and activities there as well. There are interpretive signs throughout the center grounds and on kiosks at all access points to the site and at the Lake Onalaska overlook.



4. What are your published and regular hours? Please describe hours for various seasons.

April – October (Peak Season): Tuesday through Saturday from 9 am to 3 pm

November – March (Winter Hours): Tuesday through Friday from 9 am to 3 pm

Closed on all Federal Holidays

5. What is the annual attendance for regular museum hours at your site, exclusive of special events? What is the admission fee?

Approximately 10,000 visitors per year to the Visitor Center and nearly 3 million visits per year to the Refuge. No admission fee is charged for visits or programming.

6. What is your proximity to the Great River Road?

We are located 2 miles from the Great River Road (Hwy 35), just off County Z and ZN and are nestled between the Mississippi River and the WI GRR. We are located on a tract of land called Brice Prairie (in Onalaska, Wisconsin) and the River is a short half mile walk on our paved hiking path from the Visitor Center. At the terminus of the path, we host an overlook viewing area on the Mississippi River at Lake Onalaska. At the overlook, visitors can view Bald Eagles, migrating waterfowl, swans, and geese and picturesque views of the bluffs and river. Some visitors may choose to visit the overlook first, where they can park, view the River, then walk the path to the visitor center. Quite literally visitors have to come through us to get to the "River" from the WI GRR. Many of our visitors find us only because they are traveling the WI GRR and they share their excitement in finding our center along their way. There is already adequate signage along the WI GRR identifying our location and we do get spontaneous visitors as a result. Other visitors who may travel the WI GRR to canoe or kayak, hunt or fish, or just dip their toes in the Mississippi find valuable information and a great appreciation for the area when they also combine those activities with a visit to our facility.

7. Did you enclose a letter of endorsement from your state Mississippi River Parkway Commissioner? A letter from Wisconsin Great River Road State Commissioner Sherry Quamme is included in the application materials.

Application Point of Contact:

Hallie Schulz, Visitor Services Manager,
hallie_schulz@fws.gov, 608-779-2399



Enclosure:

Application Section II and III
Letter of Support



Great River Road Network of Museums and Interpretive Centers Nomination Form

Name of organization: Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

Address: N5727 County Rd Z, Onalaska, WI 54650

Phone: 608-779-2399

Contact Person: Hallie Schulz Email address: hallie_schulz@fws.gov

Title: Visitor Services Manager Website: <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/upper-mississippi-river>

Section II- Duties and Obligations:

1. Members of the network must have a Great River Road map at their site, for reference, but preferably for distribution to visitors. One map will be provided as will an order form for additional maps, per availability by state.

We get a quantity of maps and booklets every year that we give out to the public at our front desk.

2. Members of the network must ensure that front line personnel who have contact with the public are knowledgeable of and will promote the Great River Road and the museums and interpretive centers in the region. Describe how you will ensure that your front line personnel will be trained, briefed and monitored.

We train our volunteers that staff the front desk about everything visitors can do in the area. Most of our volunteers are here because they love the area themselves and are excited to share with others about the opportunities that exist, including those along the Great River Road.

3. Are you willing to display signage at your center showing that you are a member of the Great River Road Network? This may be inside or outside signage, but must be prominently displayed. Where will you display the Interpretive Center sign?

Yes, we can display it close to the Road by our front entrance sign or we could display it as you walk into the building in our breezeway.

4. Are you willing to secure the needed funds to have an officially approved Great River Road Interpretive Center sign erected at your site?

Yes

5. Are you willing to use and incorporate the Great River Road network language and logo on all future marketing and promotional materials (i.e. radio, newsprint, social media, websites, maps, rackcards and brochures, etc.)?

Sample language: [Name of Interpretive Center] is an Interpretive Center of the Great River Road – Mississippi River Parkway Commission National Scenic Byway.

We are limited as a federal agency on certain promotional materials and designs since we need to follow the protocols of the USFWS publications, however we could certainly display it when appropriate and allowed.

Section III – Capacity:

The following questions are asked primarily for information purposes and will not be major factors in determination of inclusion in the network.

1. Do you have access to the internet? If your facility has a website, what is the address? Do you have the ability to post the www.experiencemississippiriver.com website on our website?

Yes, we could display it as one of our partners. Similar to this one <https://www.fws.gov/partner/upper-mississippi-river-basin-association>

2. Do you have traveling exhibit space? If so, what size is it in square footage? Would you be willing or interested in hosting a traveling exhibit?

We have a very long bulletin board where we switch out materials such as the Jr Duck Stamp contest and other educational items. We could use that space to display items if interested.

Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission *All American Road*



November 14, 2023

Sabrina Chandler,
Director, Upper Mississippi River Wildlife Refuge
102 Walnut Street, Ste 205
Winona, MN 55987

Dear Ms Chandler and FWS Leaders,

Thank you for this opportunity to author a letter of support specific to the Interpretive Center Application for the outstanding asset known as “Brice Prairie Center” (Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Visitor Center – Onalaska, WI). The Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission (WIMRPC) is proud to have this asset among the few centers like this on the WI Great River Road. In fact, there are very few like this Center anywhere on the entirety of the National Great River Road and within 2 minutes of the WI Great River Road itself.

To be considered as a National Great River Road National Scenic Byway Interpretive Center, it is essential that the Center connects in every way to both the Mississippi River and the Great River Road. This site is part of the 210,000 acres of the historic National Wildlife Refuge System. In the Center and also on the surrounding natural prairie landscape, the story of the native people is told as is the story of the land. It is universally accessible and provides a direct connection to Lake Onalaska, part of the Mississippi River Corridor. It is a breeding place for wildlife and aquatic animal life. It is a foundation for conservation of wildflowers and aquatic plants. This Center serves as an outdoor laboratory for visitors and scientists alike. The Center clearly meets the national standards set by the US Fish and Wildlife Service for visitor experience and quality of information shared and presented through programming and/or exhibits. In addition, the Center supports each of the intrinsic qualities vital to the GRRNSB.

The Brice Prairie site provides visitors of all ages and abilities with a menu of indoor and outdoor experiences to choose from plus allows the experience to be versatile so it meets the needs of the individual or group. The classroom and technology provisions allow educators to customize the learning modules to meet curriculum and student goals. The accommodations are engaging and stimulating all year around. Staff have been well educated to address the experience and learning needs of a broad range of groups and ages.

The outdoor facilities were well suited for independent learning and experiences during the Covid-19 period of restricted indoor use. Visitors could explore the outside pathways, trails, and pollinator areas. With return to full service, all of this has grown in popularity and the bond for indoor/outdoor recreation and learning is stronger than ever.

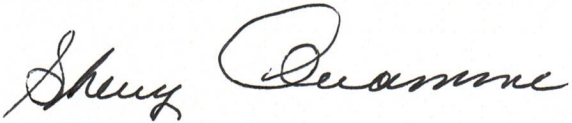
Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission *All American Road*

The WIMRPC appreciates and recognizes this amazing asset – Brice Prairie – for the way programs have been developed and the variety offered. There are seasonal changes to hours of operation and programs available. Attendance continues to grow and the site has increasing uses.

The WIMRPC highly recommends and supports the application of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Visitor Center – Brice Prairie – for consideration as a Nationally Approved Great River Road Interpretive Center.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this on behalf of Brice Prairie.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sherry Quamme". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Sherry Quamme, Chairperson
Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission
Friends of the WI Great River Road 501-c-3