



September 2017 Newsletter – An Internship in Review

by Nick Varvel



Nick Varvel (left) and MNWR Habitat Ecologist Ed Sparks conducting aquatic vegetation surveys

Coming from the high plains of Kansas, I had never been to Malheur NWR before my first day of the internship with FOMR. My only exposure to it had been the occupation last year that made national news. I really didn't know what to expect, but I accepted the position to spend the summer months living on at Malheur Refuge and helping the biologists and others with their work. It did not take long for me to fall in love with Malheur and the high desert region, and all the birds, plants, mammals, and other aspects of nature that make this area unlike any I've been to before.

I had the opportunity to work with three new biologists on various projects as they were also figuring out exactly how Malheur functions. Joe Barnett, the fish biologist, allowed me to participate and help on several of his projects, from installing ranging water-quality monitors to trapping carp. The wildlife biologist, Alexa Martinez, gave me a number of interesting projects, including installing bat-monitoring systems and assisting with duck banding in the middle of the night. My last three weeks were taken up almost entirely by aquatic vegetation surveys with the habitat ecologist, Ed Sparks, often sinking in mud or kayaking across a lake. I also had the

opportunity to conduct brood surveys and snowy plover surveys with Callie Gesmundo from Portland Audubon. All of these experiences—including time spent working with the High Desert Partnership crew, and locals Rick Vetter and Joan Suther showing me many incredible places in Harney County—were hugely rewarding and helped me gain countless skills I will use in my future work as a biologist.

It is almost impossible to narrow my summer down to a favorite experience. Some of the most memorable included netting flightless ducks from an airboat at 1am, bushwacking through what seemed like walls of bulrushes in the summer heat conducting vegetation surveys, watching families of tree swallows and California quail fledge and grow up right out my front window, flying across Malheur Lake in an airboat as hordes of pelicans, terns, gull, ibises, and cormorants swarmed all around me, or perhaps the daily dawn chorus of Brewer's sparrows, sage thrashers, and Bullock's orioles.

This was one of the most memorable summers I've had the pleasure of experiencing. Despite waking up at 3am often and getting back covered in mud, ticks, and so many mosquito bites, I ended each and every day feeling good about what had been done. I learned more than I can ever quite put into words about how to conduct high-quality refuge management, a skill I will no doubt use in my future. I have the utmost respect for the USFWS staff and FOMR, and they have my gratitude for this opportunity. I hope that I was able to give something back to this incredible refuge.



MNWR Fishery Biologist Joe Barnett and Nick Varvel trapping carp