



National Wildlife Refuge System

[NWRS Home](#)[About](#)[Land](#)[Planning](#)[Visitors](#)[Wildlife & Habitat Management](#)[Policies & Budget](#)[You Can Help](#)[Like](#)

Be the first of your friends to like this.

[At 97, He's Still Leading Birders at Hagerman Refuge](#)

By Susan Morse

Since Karl Haller began volunteering at Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge in Texas, seven refuge managers have come and gone. Cedar and locust have invaded refuge fields, and Dallas has crept toward the refuge boundary, changing bucolic to metropolitan. Only Haller hasn't changed—as sure a presence as the snow geese that fill the refuge every winter and the songbirds that return each spring.

At 97, Haller is still conducting refuge bird surveys, as he's been doing every week for 50 years. On Thursdays, he drives a group of ladies along the same 23-mile bird-watching route.

"If you're interested in birds or wildlife, you just have to keep up with it," he says. "You can have a good time out here."

In the process, you can also build a scientific database that's invaluable for understanding bird trends in a time of drought and climate change, says refuge manager Kathy Whaley.

Thanks to Haller, the refuge knows spring migration of neotropical

songbirds, shorebirds and waders begins weeks earlier than it used to. Will insects that the birds eat keep pace? No one knows. Haller also has helped document species never before seen at the refuge. “Last spring, we had a green-tailed towhee here—the first time one’s ever been recorded in the county,” says Whaley. “We think the drought farther west pushed the bird here looking for food.”

Whaley praises Haller’s passion for nature and his social engagement. “Most people I know at age 97 are not out at a national wildlife refuge birding,” she says. “They’re doing the best they can to just make it day to day. Karl is active, engaged, conversational, pleasant to be around. I admire him very much.”

Born in 1916 in Wheeling, WV, Haller developed an early interest in birds. “When I was eight years old, I heard somebody say something about a bird feeder. I found an old box, put it on a post in my backyard, filled it with a little bit of scratch—you know, chicken feed—and started getting lots of birds.” He experimented with other feed. “I heard some guy talk about a nuthatch. I didn’t have the slightest idea what it was. Then I learned. I would take little bits of English walnut. The birds would pick them up, carry them to the ground, and break them up.”



Karl Haller has been a volunteer at Hagerman National Wildlife Refuge in Texas since 1963. (Rick Cantu/USFWS)

He credits the Brooks Bird Club in Wheeling, where he became a charter member in 1932, with giving him his real start in birding. In the late '30s/ early '40s, he received a bachelor’s degree in biology and a master’s in zoology, discovered the Sutton’s warbler in West Virginia, and collected natural history museum specimens on an expedition to Canada’s James Bay region. He served in the Air Force during World War II before joining the biology department at Austin College in Sherman, TX, where he taught field ornithology and bird taxidermy, and served as a lab coordinator.

Haller began leading birding trips at Hagerman Refuge in 1963, compiling Christmas Bird Counts and mentoring dozens of budding ornithologists. In 1995 he was the National Wildlife Refuge Association’s Volunteer of the Year.

This spring the refuge honored Haller for his service. “I was never more surprised in my life,” he says of the small ceremony at which he received a plaque and friends praised his knowledge and graciousness.

Ruth Sonnenburg, who birded with Haller for 20 years, starting in the 1960s, recalls his patience with beginners. “If we saw something, Karl never said, ‘Oh no. You couldn’t have seen that.’ He never put us down ... He was a great teacher and a great person ... and still is.”

Susan Morse is a writer–editor in the Refuge System Branch of Communications.

[Back to Index](#)

Refuge Update July/August 2013

Last updated: July 1, 2013