

Volden shares talents at nature center

By Carol Bryant

The Independent

Eric Volden loves photography, art, astronomy, skiing and canoeing.

He feels fortunate they are part of his job as naturalist at Crane Meadows Nature Center south of the Interstate 80 Alda exit.

"A lot a people don't get to use their hobbies at work," Volden said.

Volden, 39, began working there in September 1992 after spending eight years as a naturalist at Fontenelle Forest's Neale Woods Nature Center north of Omaha. Before that, he was employed at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge for three years.

Crane Meadows Nature Center's main emphasis is teaching people about the Platte River.

"We're not telling them how to use the Platte River. Through education, they can make better decisions about the river," he said.

"The Platte River is a critical river for wildlife, humans, crops and drinking water. It's important for everyone to use the Platte River as wisely as possible. Water is going to be a big issue. It is now," he said.

Volden said the nature center is separate from the Platte River Whooping Crane Habitat Maintenance Trust and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The nature center is a private, non-profit organization formed in April 1989. It is located on 240 acres leased from the Crane Trust and is neither state nor federally funded.

His talents are very visible at the nature center, where visitors smell a freshly cut cedar tree as they enter.

He presented an hour-long "Reflections of Nature" slide show Dec. 4 revealing his colorful, crisp Nebraska scenes from each season set to Platte River poetry and music.

His sandhill crane drawing dominates the front of a T-shirt available at the center. He said he has to make time for his detailed pen and ink drawings.

"Astronomy is near and dear to my heart," Volden said. During college, he worked three years as a planetarium instructor. He was involved in the construction of the Neale Woods observatory, but said Omaha is not an ideal astronomy place because it's "so polluted with light."

The nature center offers an "incredibly dark sky" and a broad, flat horizon, which are great features for star gazers. He gave a September presentation telling about the importance of astronomy to the Pawnee.

A December cross-country skiing hike was canceled because there was no snow, and a September canoe trip on the Platte was called off due to the weather. Volden has future skiing and canoeing activities in mind.

His favorite Nebraska river for canoeing is the Niobrara.

"It's like walking into a completely different world. It's a scenic river," he said.

Volden grew up on a dairy farm 10 miles outside Viroqua, Wis.

"I like the idea of a rural upbringing," he said. During his youth he cared for cattle and chickens and "spent a lot of time in the woods."

Volden is impressed with the writing of conservationist Aldo Leopold, who helped found the Wilderness Society. He was on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin at Madison from 1933 until his death while fighting a fire at a neighbor's farm in 1948.

"I subscribe to a lot of his feelings about nature," Volden said.

Volden earned degrees in biology and environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, then moved to Nebraska in 1979 to work at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge.

Volden said he is excited about developing Crane Meadows Nature Center.

"This nature center has more potential than Fontenelle Forest," he said.

Volden said Crane Meadows could attract more visitors in one month than Fontenelle Forest draws in a year. There are more than 100,000 people who come each spring to see the cranes, and those people could also be interested in stopping at the nature center.

"It's exciting to be on the ground floor of starting the nature center," he said.

Volden has prepared exhibits at the nature center featuring pine combs and prairie grasses. A crane exhibit will be ready in the spring. A bird-feeding area can be viewed through a window at the center.

"We've come a long way in a short time," he said.

A permanent building will be constructed there within three years. Volden said it will include a classroom, auditorium and exhibit space. Additional staff members such as another full-time naturalist or ranger could eventually be hired.

Volden said most people don't realize the nature center is open all year and offers many opportunities besides watching cranes. Otters, wild turkey, least terns, piping plover and bluebirds are among the wildlife to be spotted there.

He has been busy giving presentations in the area and also has worked with school groups visiting the nature center. Volunteers are needed to help with those groups and other tasks.

Some of the programs Volden has offered at the nature center are similar to ones available at Fontenelle Forest. For instance, the Enchanted Halloween Trail event Oct. 21-23 featured trails lined with 250 glowing jack-o-lanterns. The nature center sponsored a November trip to see the snow geese at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge. A "Caroling Along

the Platte" event will be Dec. 18.

Morning and evening tours at the nature center's crane observation bunker south of the Highway 281-Interstate 80 intersection are popular. The tours originate at the nature center and include a program about cranes and the Platte. March 10 to April 9 tour reservations can be made after Jan. 1 by calling the nature center's office, 382-1820. The \$10 charge per person supports the cost of the tours and area environmental education.

Volden said no place in the world boasts a site comparable to the Platte River between Grand Island and Kearney, where 500,000 sandhill cranes arrive along a 60-mile stretch each spring. Approximately the same number of cranes were on a larger portion of the Platte during pioneer times.

"Most of it is not suitable now for cranes," he said. "It's a spectacle we hope will go on a long time."

Nancy Nichols of Grand Island has been office manager since February. Her duties include scheduling bunker tours, helping with hikes and day camp and assisting Volden in other tasks.

"Eric is very, very knowledgeable of many things having to do with nature. He's a wealth of information," Nichols said. "He's a pleasant person to work for."

Ben Hessel of Grand Island has worked as a part-time ranger since July and said Volden has taught him a lot.

"He has a vast knowledge of nature and wildlife around here," Hessel said.

Hessel does a variety of tasks, including mowing trails and janitorial work. He is employed thanks to Green Thumb, a national nonprofit organization that promotes community service and employment chances for older Americans. Green Thumb is primarily funded by the U.S. Department of Labor and pays Hessel's wages.

Volden said he and his family are adjusting to their move to Grand Island.

"We like it a lot here," he said.

His wife, Diane, works at Principal Financial Group. Their son Ben, 7, is a second-grader at Shoemaker School.

"He is really into trains," Volden said.

Positive features about Grand Island are a lower cost of living, a "laid-back neighborly feeling" and friendly people, he said. For instance, when he was laying sod in the yard at their home, neighbors soon came over to help.