

MNRR

From Page 1

side channels — not the main ones — that are deep as we go through. We went through one of those from Verdel to Running Water, and it was a good 5 to 7 feet deep there. You have channels that, five years ago, didn't exist."

The boat tours also came across a surge in the population of bald eagles which at one time faced extinction, Wilkinson said.

The tours impressed Pam Cooke with the Yankton-based Southeast South Dakota Tourism Association (SSDTA).

"So many people who live along the river don't realize what a beautiful and magnificent natural resource we have right outside our back door," she said. "The National Park Service stressed over and over again that, of the entire Missouri River, only one-third of it lies in its natural

state because the rest of it has been channelized — and we've got most of that one-third in our area. It's one of the best kept secrets in the nation."

During the trips, Cooke saw the high water marks on the trees, a reminder of last year's flooding, along with a huge sandbar that had previously been tiny.

"The park rangers stressed constantly that the river changes its channel, so you never have the same trip each time you go," she said.

"The pilot of the boat was watching the depth finder to see the deepest channel part and its changes."

The sandbars and other environmental changes created by the flooding are being tracked by Galen Jons, natural resource specialist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Yankton.

"Sandbars will typically build up in elevation to just below the surface of the water. When the water drops, sandbars are left exposed, and this is what the piping plover and least tern nest on," he said. "Other species of wildlife, such as turtles, also nest in

these same areas, and they are important to many species of wildlife on the river."

The high flows flushed out many of the braided channels in the wetlands around Springfield, washing the sediment further into Lewis and Clark Lake, Jons said.

"The net effect was that sandbars in the Springfield area remained the same elevation as before the flood, but the water level is now lower in the channel, which makes the sandbars appear higher," he said.

Birds nested on many of the sandbars this summer, and the Corps' crews have found nests in almost 30 different locations up and down the lake, Jons said. "Most of these nests have already hatched. There are chicks running around on many of the sandbars, and some chicks have even fledged already," he said.

Most sandbars in the Springfield area are growing with vegetation and will not likely provide nesting habitat for the birds and turtles next year, Jons said. However, the Running Water sandbars cannot hold enough

water to support vegetation and will continue to provide nesting habitat for years.

The Corps posts signs on sandbars where birds are nesting to warn people that these areas are off-limits, Jons said.

The sandbar changes are noticeable to Sandy Korkow of Springfield, executive director of the Missouri Sedimentation Action Coalition (MSAC). She has seen the changes while kayaking between Running Water and Springfield.

Korkow fears that meaningful research or data collection is not being done to determine the impact of the 2011 flooding on sediment in Lewis and Clark Lake and around Niobrara.

"Especially when something historical happens to our river culture, we need to gauge its effects. Time continues to tick before sediment takes over Lewis and Clark Lake," she said. "Even though Gavins Point and Lewis and Clark Lake is not a major player in flood control in the Missouri River system, we all remembered the importance of the

dams and reservoirs after last summer. Implementing effective sediment management in all the reservoirs is past due."

However, people along the river know all the data in the world will not address sedimentation, Korkow said.

"We have yet to take the research to the next step where it can make a difference in people's lives and foster healthy reservoirs for future generations," she said.

For Wilkinson, that awareness effort includes not only his boat tours but also Tuesday's shooting of a television program with Hartington, Neb., outdoorsman Gary Howey in promoting Bon Homme County and the MNRR.

"This is one of the dramatic scenic vistas on what is one of the least developed stretches of the river," Wilkinson said. "When people think of national parks in South Dakota, they think of the Badlands, Mount Rushmore, Wind Cave and Jewel Cave. We need to spread the word that we have a national park in

our backyard."

The Missouri River has played a tremendous role in developing the state and entire region, and the MNRR represents one of the last remnants as explorers Lewis and Clark would have seen it, Wilkinson said.

"When you are talking Yankton, Bon Homme or Charles Mix counties, their ancestors came to South Dakota on steamboats and plowed the prairie into profit," he said. "The Missouri River is more central to who we are in South Dakota and the development of the state than any other natural entity in the state of South Dakota. Even today, South Dakota isn't I-29 or I-90, it's the Missouri River."

That's why the promotion efforts are so important, Wilkinson said. "Look at what we would be if the (Missouri) river wasn't here," he said. "It's an incredible river, and it needs to be protected."

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