**Carrol Henderson, Minnesota's wildlife champion, retiring**

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Carrol Henderson, who will retire Wednesday after 41 years as the only director of the Minnesota DNR's Non-game Wildlife Program. He has worked to bring more children outdoors, including this workshop at Itasca State Park for a program where Henderson used digital cameras to get kids interested in nature. Photo courtesy of Carrol Henderson1 / 3

You might not recognize the name Carrol Henderson, but if you appreciate wildlife in Minnesota, you will probably want to thank him.

Henderson, 72, has been the only director of the Nongame Wildlife Program of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources since its inception in 1977. He's helped spur recovery efforts for peregrine falcons, trumpeter swans, river otters, bald eagles and other lesser-known species.

Henderson proposed the Minnesota tax form Chickadee Checkoff, also called the Loon Line, where taxpayers can donate part of their state tax refund, or pay extra taxes, which has raised millions of dollars for nongame wildlife projects.

His research showed lead pellets from shotgun shells were poisoning birds feeding in fields and shallow water, leading to a state and eventually federal ban on lead shot for waterfowl hunting.

Under his leadership the Nongame Wildlife Program went from one employee, him, and essentially no budget the first year to 14 employees and a $3 million annual budget this year.

Henderson grew up in Zearing, Iowa, and attended Iowa [State University](http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/sports/outdoors/4506447-carrol-henderson-minnesotas-wildlife-champion-retiring) where he earned a degree in zoology in 1968 and a [masters](http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/sports/outdoors/4506447-carrol-henderson-minnesotas-wildlife-champion-retiring) in Forest Resources from the University of Georgia.

His first job in wildlife was as assistant wildlife manager at the Lac Qui Parle wildlife area in western Minnesota, from 1974 to 1977. Now, after 44 years with the DNR, 41 of those on the job protecting and promoting Minnesota's non-game wildlife species and their habitats.

Henderson's last day on the job will be Wednesday. Before he retires the News Tribune posed some questions on the past, present and future of non-game wildlife in Minnesota.

**News Tribune:** You are the only director the Minnesota DNR's Non-game Wildlife Program has ever had, steering the effort since its inception in 1977. What spurred the DNR to start the program?

**Henderson:** When the DNR wildlife research director retired in 1975... Section of Wildlife Chief Roger Holmes felt the DNR needed to address the needs of our non-game wildlife in addition to game species, and he created this position of non-game wildlife program supervisor. I was in charge of a statewide program for managing and preserving nongame/nonhunted species — birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and invertebrates like butterflies and dragonflies — with no staff and a budget of about $25,000 a year, including my salary.

**News Tribune:** Why did you take the job?

**Henderson:** I've always had a very broad [interest](http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/sports/outdoors/4506447-carrol-henderson-minnesotas-wildlife-champion-retiring) and concern for all wildlife, founded in a farm background in Iowa where I enjoyed wildlife ranging from pheasants, rabbits and squirrels to red-headed woodpeckers, bobolinks and western meadowlarks. I've hunted since I was about 10 years old and am also an avid birder who has seen about 3,000 species of birds in my lifetime. This job was an opportunity to apply my broad ecological perspective on wildlife management to a landscape scale across Minnesota and beyond.

**News Tribune:** What do you feel are the program's biggest success stories?

**Henderson:** Restoration of the trumpeter swan, peregrine falcon and the river otter along the Minnesota River. We preserved over 5,300 acres of land for non-game wildlife... designated as Wildlife Management Areas, Aquatic Management Areas and Scientific and Natural Areas. We have also reached thousands of Minnesota youth with conservation education programs like Project WILD, Project WET and our digital photography Bridge to Nature workshops. We've sold nearly 300,000 of my books like "Woodworking for Wildlife," "Landscaping for Wildlife," "Lakescaping for Wildlife," "Traveler's Guide to Wildlife in Minnesota" and "Wild About Birds: The DNR Bird Feeding Guide." The books give Minnesotans hands-on information to help wildlife. The book royalties generated over $250,000 for the Nongame Wildlife Program.

**News Tribune:** Are there areas where you wish the program could do more?

**Henderson:** We need to be more effective reducing the use of lead used in both hunting ammo and fishing tackle. Lead poisons loons when they swallow pebbles and small lead jigs and sinkers on lake bottoms. (Loons need the pebbles to help digest their food.) All it takes is one jig or sinker to kill a loon. There are a variety of nontoxic jigs and sinkers available but anglers need to ask for them. We also have at least 30 or so bald eagles (turned into the University of Minnesota Raptor Center) poisoned by lead every deer season after consuming lead fragments in the deer gut piles. Undoubtedly many more eagles perish and are never found. These deaths are unnecessary. Non-toxic ammunition is available in most calibers for rifles, shotguns and muzzleloaders. The prices are now comparable to better quality lead ammo... Of even greater concern is that tiny lead fragments penetrate venison and are consumed by deer hunters, their spouses, children and friends. From 10-15 percent of the venison that is donated by hunters to Minnesota food shelves must be destroyed because the packages contain lead fragments... (That translates to roughly 1 million) pounds of lead-tainted venison that was consumed by Minnesotans last year. This is not a criticism of deer hunting. It is a wake-up call ... that we should not be feeding lead to our families. It can cause cognitive issues in older adults and can decrease the IQ of young children and harm developing fetuses.

**News Tribune:** We've seen success in restoration of some non-game species, like bald eagles, wolves and peregrine falcons in Minnesota. Is there a species that is not doing well right now that rises to the top of your concern list?

**Henderson:** The common tern, which ironically is not that common, nesting only in the Duluth harbor, Leech Lake, Lake of the Woods and Mille Lacs Lake. Prairie songbirds are decreasing, like the western meadowlark, bobolink and dickcissel, as are some wetland birds like the red-necked grebe.

**News Tribune:** You were among the first to raise concerns over potential impacts of the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill on Minnesota loons that winter in the Gulf of Mexico and feed off the seabed there. What's the current status of our state bird?

**Henderson:** Minnesota loons have been monitored on 600 lakes... since 1994. Current data does not identify any declines in loon numbers. But loons are long-lived birds, sometimes over 20 years, so so we [continue](http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/sports/outdoors/4506447-carrol-henderson-minnesotas-wildlife-champion-retiring) to look for any problems. We submitted a loon conservation plan to access BP settlement funds to benefit Minnesota loons. The settlement was expected to be millions of dollars for Minnesota loon efforts.

**News Tribune:** Problems like habitat loss, climate change, invasive species and funding shortages seem to loom large for wildlife. What concerns you most going forward with non-game species in Minnesota?

**Henderson:** The biggest challenge is adequate funding to keep up with the increasing demands. The best solution would be the bipartisan Recovering America's Wildlife Act now in Congress. The legislation would dedicate funds from offshore oil funds from the Gulf of Mexico for wildlife conservation nationwide. Minnesota's share would be about $26 million dollars annually. If you care about wildlife these bills — H.R. 4647 and S.3223 — need your support, and we need to encourage our senators and representatives to vote for it.

**News Tribune:** What's your favorite memory of your work at DNR?

**Henderson:** Jan. 10, 1997, when I was visiting the trumpeter swan wintering site in the Mississippi River at Monticello. I was sitting on the rocks at the water's edge watching a flock of swans in the middle of the river. One swan parted from the flock and began swimming toward me. I began photographing the swan as it approached to within a few yards and finally stepped into the shallow water in front of me. I was able to photograph the leg band as it stood at eye level with me. I began to talk to the swan in a calm low voice to set it at ease, and it stood there perhaps three or four minutes watching me and listening. Then it turned and swam back to rejoin its flock. I later learned from the band number that I had collected that swan as an egg in Alaska on June 10, 1988. I flew it back to Minnesota along with 49 other eggs that year and released the swan two years later at Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge... The swan was nine years old when I saw it at Monticello. I think it just stopped by to say "Hi, dad, and thanks."

**News Tribune:** Does Minnesota do enough to assure the future of its non-game species?

**Henderson:** No. Non-game wildlife includes an enormous diversity of wildlife ranging from birds and mammals to invertebrates like butterflies and dragonflies. It takes many biologists to monitor the status of these many species and then to decide which ones require management, surveys, or restoration actions. In addition to the biological side of conservation, we need to add an additional dimension to our program addressing the needs and opportunities related to nature/wildlife tourism to our program to accommodate the increasing numbers of people who are participating in nature travel and wildlife photography.

**News Tribune:** What's the best way to get more people interested in nature, and wildlife, here in Minnesota?

**Henderson:** We need to get people/families/kids outdoors through programs like Project WILD, Project WET, and use nature photography to get kids involved like we did for the Digital Photography Bridge to Nature project. Nature is not something to be experienced through TV. It needs to be "in the habitat" and instill activities and opportunities for people that can extend through a lifetime. Also, recruitment to the outdoors needs to include many outdoor skills and activities, not just hunting and fishing.

**News Tribune:** What's ahead for Carrol Henderson in retirement?

**Henderson:** Ethelle and I will continue traveling and birding. I will be the new Conservation director for the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union so I can advocate for wildlife conservation projects through that position, better organize my photo files that now include over 1,100 bird species, and consider more writing projects, like a book reflecting on my career in conservation and an article for the Minnesota Conservation Volunteer.