

Refuge welcomes new deputy manager

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The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge has a new deputy refuge manager.

David Farmer arrived here about three weeks ago from the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Montana.

Born and raised in Iowa, he first learned to love the great outdoors by fishing for largemouth bass, channel catfish, bluegill and bullhead in rural farm ponds, much as Oklahomans do.

Iowa has a few refuges, most of them along the Mississippi River, but most of its land is in private ownership. He did spend a lot of time on Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge in northwest Missouri and has a lot of good memories there. It's right on the Missouri River, has a strong flyway presence and is famous for its concentration of snow geese.

"I had a lot of relatives and friends that all farmed so I had access to some great farm pond fishing. So I kind of got spoiled at farm pond fishing and just tromping around," he said. "Just really enjoy being outdoors, being active, helping out on the farm, too, on the stuff I could help out with."

In high school he always knew he wanted to go into a wildlife field, and that's what got him looking at the wildlife program degrees. He followed his passion and



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Deputy Refuge Manager David Farmer is learning the lay of the land and who's who at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge after arriving here from Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Montana.

his heart by earning his bachelor of science in wildlife ecology and conservation from Northwestern Missouri State University in Maryville.

"The university I went to is very focused on the field, so it was a lot of papers written within the classes. Like for example the wildlife management ecology class met one day a week for four hours. It was a hundred percent field trip-based, but when you're done, it required writing a report and those reports were 17 to 30 pages long," Farmer said.

He can't recall having any tests in that course, but the class spent a lot of time writing. Their professor was very detail-oriented

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DEPUTY REFUGE MANAGER

and caught every little mistake, even on formatting, thanks to his trusty ruler. Everything had to meet academic standards, with the Latin names for every plant and animal in the field trip area.

Like his predecessor, Ralph Bryant, who left here in May, Farmer will head up law enforcement on the refuge. After college, his first full-time job was as a game warden for the state Game & Fish Department in North Dakota. Refuges are plentiful throughout that state, but the area where he lived was one of the few counties where the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service had no presence. Farmer did, however, work a lot of refuge lands as a state warden in the eastern and northern halves of the state, especially during waterfowl season. In the Northern Plains there is more open access for hunters, and waterfowl production areas are open to hunting in season.

"It was always something new, something different, every single day," he recalls "A lot of freedom to go out and make a difference, so it was always exciting. I really enjoyed my time up there."

After two years in the rolling plains of North Dakota, he moved to the hickory woodlands and limestone bluffs of northeast Kansas, where he worked for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (now the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism). As a public land manager, he managed state fishing lakes and helped out some larger wildlife management areas. Ninety percent of his time was devoted to management — as the biologist, the manager, the maintenance man and the fireman — but he was also expected to devote 10 percent of his time to law enforcement.

"You did some proactive patrols, but a lot of times you were just dealing with things as they would pop up on your day-to-day management activities," he found.

After 4½ years of working for the state, a position opened up at the Quivira National Wildlife Refuge. He applied for it and landed his first job with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 2011. He's been with the agency ever since.

A short time later, a great opportunity opened up at Red Rock Lakes National

Wildlife Refuge in southwest Montana, relatively close to Yellowstone National Park.

"I've always had a desire to work in mountainous areas. I really enjoy backpacking and mountain-based recreational activities," he said.

Red Rock Lakes is considered the most remote refuge in the 48 contiguous states. The Centennial Mountains range in altitude from 6,700 to 9,100 feet above mean sea level. The refuge also had the largest wetland complex within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

"I was surrounded by mountains. Some had great access, some had minimal access. So it was a good variety. You can get to the easy areas and hike some more populated trails that were well-maintained ... or if you wanted to go difficult, you could just go on the trails that very few used and bushwhack a lot in between," Farmer said.

He was there a little over four years before coming here.

"You know, it's been great so far. The people around here have been really good to work with. The community's been very supportive. It was a kind of welcome surprise that if I'm in town and people ask what I do and I say I work at the refuge, it's really fulfilling to see their faces light up and talk about how great the refuge is and how they love going out there," he said.