

WALK OF RECONCILIATION 2009
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Mississippi River Revival, sponsor

John Latsch must be turning over in his grave, crying out painfully from the recent rape of habitat at his gift to Winona, Aghaming Park and Preserve. Off-road pickups, motorcycles and other vehicles have turned 25 acres of a sensitive wetlands, a floodplain forest, into a wasteland gouged with uncountable loops, ruts, spurs, damaged trees and pulverized logs. Vehicle scars indicate off-roaders have entered about 800 acres total, disturbing two historic territories of red-shouldered hawks during the time the state-protected species usually establishes nests.

Mississippi River Revival invites you to a “Walk of Reconciliation” starting at the Wisconsin side of the Wagon Bridge, Saturday March 14, 1:00 PM. Prepare yourself with mud-resistant footwear and the courage to witness a terrible assault. We’ll walk two miles roundtrip, visit the damaged site, share cookies and discuss how to reconcile our love of nature with needless destruction.

I will interpret the damage but also highlight habitat niches which can preserve species for future generations--as long as adequate protection prevails. The city currently allows vehicles virtually uncontrolled in the wetland forest December through February. It opens an old roadbed allegedly for ice-fishing access, but mud runners run recklessly, and since they displace soil which ends up in adjacent sloughs, fish habitat suffers.

We’ll visit sloughs where the build-up of sediments brought to the Mississippi by the forces of soil erosion has smothered vegetation, blocked out sunlight necessary for plant growth, and ultimately destroyed aquatic plant communities used as fish nurseries by bluegills, largemouth bass, and northern pike. We’ll visit sloughs used by the river’s most seriously declining duck, the lesser scaup, which winters off the Louisiana and Gulf Coasts in ocean waters that now include an ecological “dead zone” polluted by nitrates from intensive corn farming and other contaminants. We’ll also visit deep wallows of tire-scars in exact locations where North America’s most swiftly declining bird, the rusty blackbird, forages during migration.

The rusty blackbird winters in remnants of ivory-billed woodpecker habitat on the Lower Miss, relying upon aquatic insects and small fish in bottomland forests. It migrates through bottomland forests and swarms Aghaming during spring. Scientists estimate its population at less than two million, a 99% decline since 1966. The species ranges all the way east to the Atlantic, yet hundreds—sometimes thousands—occur at Aghaming daily late-March to mid-April.

We’ll visit a turtle hot-spot and turtle nursery, a woods where female snappers crawl full of eggs toward nest sites, a road where vehicles crush the female snappers, a sandy bank where vehicles destroy eggs.

We’ll peer up at granddaddy cottonwoods, fishing perches for eagles and tall-tree nest-niches for North America’s most swiftly declining warbler, the cerulean, sometimes a breeding bird at Aghaming. We’ll visit granddaddy oaks, food source for the acorn-loving wood ducks, deer, red-headed woodpecker etc. We’ll look again at tire ruts. Exotic species—buckthorn, honeysuckles, canary grass--will likely grow in the scars, preventing the regeneration of the oaks, cottonwoods and other forest trees, the best assets nature has to sequester carbon and battle global warming.

We'll wander to one bank where tire-scars invite purple loosestrife and to another where the river in its artificial channel cuts beneath upturned roots, eating an island. We'll consider why Winona enables vehicles to hasten the erosion and demise of islands while taxpayers spend millions of dollars each year to build them on the Upper Miss.

The sign beside the gate intends to control traffic on the old roadbed at Aghaming, but it speaks doublespeak. Though the gate exists to close sensitive habitat to driving, the big letters say ROAD OPEN. The tiny letters say December 1 to March 1. The big letters of the sign next to it say CRITICAL HABITAT. If you switch two words, you unfortunately get an accurate picture—OPEN ROAD in CRITICAL HABITAT.

The gate intends to protect the red-shouldered hawk and the floodplain forest, both about 90% gone. The gate has been left open after March 1 for the second consecutive year. It's also so flimsy pickups bash right through it, even though citizens previously offered \$1400 to buy the best gate in the wildlife business.

But neither the gate nor ice-fishing is the real problem. Neither the 1998 Aghaming Park Plan nor the 2005 Aghaming Trail System Plan recommended motorized traffic anywhere downriver from the Wagon Bridge Road. I worked on both projects, and as I remember things, intelligent experts recognized a long history of vehicle abuse at Aghaming, and the need for trails, not traffic in a wildlife-rich environs.

The city lacks the political will, expertise and money to responsibly manage and enforce cars, trucks, motorcycles and four-wheelers in sensitive habitat. It should respect Latsch's gift by keeping vehicles altogether out of the wetland woods and marshes during the entire year.

Richie Swanson sometimes works for the Mississippi River Revival, which currently advocates for Higgins Eye Pearlymussel, blufflands, clean water, river cleanups. This story appeared March 14, 2009 in the Winona Daily News.