

SECOND ANNUAL PASSENGER PIGEON WALK  
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Mississippi River Revival, sponsor

North America's most swiftly declining bird struts these days like a pint-sized crow at Aghaming Park and Preserve. Rusty blackbirds balance themselves on floating logs, tapping and probing bills into old wood for insects, searching for insect-prey to fuel migrations to nest-sites as distant as northwestern Alaska. You hear blackbirds squeaking like wet-rusty hinges, rattling like broken glass, whistling screechy *koo-a-lees*, you hear a species 99% gone since 1966, once counted by the millions during Christmas Bird Counts, now rarely by the thousand.

Mississippi River Revival invites you to experience the "rusty" at our second annual Passenger Pigeon Walk, Saturday April 18. Meet at the Wisconsin end of the Wagon Bridge either at 10:00 a.m. or 1:00 p.m. I'll briefly discuss the passenger pigeon's local history, then we'll walk 90 minutes through floodplain forest to marshes, scoping waterfowl and an osprey nest, visiting other habitat niches. We'll also provide trash bags for removing litter after walks.

Passenger pigeons vanished as American settlers deforested the landscape, over-hunted the doves and shipped them by railroad to big-city markets. But today rusty blackbirds give us a chance to succeed at preservation and avoid extinction. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century passenger pigeons nested in massive colonies on the upper Mississippi, darkening the air as they arrived, sounding like roaring locomotives in the sky. Nest colonies turned islands slate-blue for miles, and naturalists counted hundreds of nests per tree and 1500 nests while standing in the same spot.

Indians and settlers struck nest-trees with clubs, and chicks fell like apples. Settlers gunned them easily from bluff-tops, fields, cabins and especially at nesting grounds. One hunter harvested 60,000 chicks in a year. Others piled them in wagons and paraded them through Chatfield, holding "camp-meetings for epicures," celebrating pin-feather hash, chicks stewed in whiskey sauce, pigeon pies.

Settlement forced the pigeons into marginal habitat, depriving them of sufficient food and adequate numbers to reproduce. Today, the rusty blackbird faces some similar problems, some different. Rusties winter on the lower Mississippi, using depleted remnants of once-gigantic forests, and they rely upon Aghaming's floodplain forest on their way north, an ecosystem 90% gone. They toss away leaf-litter like unwanted trash, clutching sticks with claws, probing bark and soil for worms and other larvae. They cling to the bases of flooded trees, snatching bugs, and they wade into sloughs, ducking heads underwater for crayfish and snails, emerging with darting-yellow eyes.

Rusties build stick-nests amid beaver ponds, bogs and other northern shores. They're absent from vast regions where they once bred abundantly, partly because logging, gas and oil development, peat production, hydroelectric projects and agriculture usurp habitat. Global warming evidently dries up their wetland nest-territories, perhaps changing the availability and composition of aquatic-insect prey. Mercury may contaminate small-fish and insect prey. Acid rain may deplete calcium in soil and insects necessary for egg production. Blackbird control programs—poisoning agricultural pests on wintering grounds—may also have diminished the rusty in the past.

Depressing? Remember, Aghaming supports raptor populations once decimated by DDT. Last year's walk witnessed ospreys mating, bald eagles soaring, and a peregrine falcon harassing a great-horned owl. Rusties, sandhill cranes and the river's most seriously declining duck, the lesser scaup, also appeared in protected wetlands.

We'll hope to see a snapping turtle Saturday—not on a dangerous highway or in riprap where it can dehydrate or in a fish net headed for Chicago's soup market—but in a sleepy slough where a hooded merganser rests on a log-sweep, watching her nest-hole high in a maple. We'll hope for a crayfish's mud chimney, smells of mink musk, and the dazzling glimmer of dragonflies, favorite food of Aghaming's rare yellow-headed blackbird colony.

We'll visit an oak where declining yellow-billed cuckoos pass twigs over shoulders in mating rituals similar to those passenger pigeons performed. We'll even hope for Aghaming's long-lost woodpecker, the red-headed, which vanished mysteriously from a granddaddy grove during breeding season two years ago.

A common sparrow will certainly sing, reminding us how marvelously humans can solve mysteries. Computer sonograms have revealed "our" eastern song sparrows sing differently than west-coast populations. One population learns songs by matching neighbors' song-phrases exactly, the other by mixing them up. One population migrates, the other doesn't. Can you guess which learns by precise mimicry? And why?

Few would have guessed the crucial value of John Latsch's gift when he gave it 75 years ago, so come muddy your boots and see what Earth Day cultivates inside you. Please, bring kids and binoculars.

Info in this story derived from *The Passenger Pigeon, its natural history and extinction*, A.W. Schorger, *The Use and Conservation of Minnesota Game 1850-1900*, E.B. Swanson, *Birds of North America Online*, *Birder's Conservation Handbook*, Jeffrey Wells, and the Migratory Bird Center. The story first appeared in the Winona Daily News, April 2009.