

FOURTH ANNUAL PASSENGER PIGEON WALK
Deepwater Horizon and Aghaming birds
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Mississippi River Revival, sponsor

During last year's Passenger Pigeon Walk, prospects for wildlife seemed bright at Aghaming Park and Preserve. Participants saw America's most swiftly declining bird, rusty blackbirds, and ospreys displaying on a nest, continuing to rebound from near-extinction. We tiptoed to turtle sites, where ancient creatures basked in sun, restoring food stores after spending winter frozen in mud. Three days later, red-shouldered hawks were confirmed breeding deep in Aghaming where off-road vehicles had overrun the floodplain forest the previous year.

Citizens and government had worked hard together, insuring vehicle-free habitat for the state-threatened hawk in 2010. Now a mama red-shoulder hunkered down in a cottonwood-crotch, incubating eggs nearly invisibly, just as her needs demanded. But 12 hours later the Deepwater Horizon well exploded in the Gulf of Mexico.

By the time red-shoulder chicks poked fuzzy-white heads above the nest-rim, oil had spewed three weeks. It continued four weeks later as three young hawks stood with creamy-mottled breasts, flexing wings, itching to fly. Oil continued to spill six weeks after red-shoulders vacated the nest, while fledglings of great blue herons and other gulf-bound species stored calories here before flying south.

Mississippi River Revival hosts the fourth annual Passenger Pigeon Walk Saturday, April 30. Please, bring kids and binoculars. We'll meet at the Wisconsin end of the Wagon Bridge 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. I'll briefly evoke passenger pigeons during the 19th century. We'll walk 90 minutes, a one-mile roundtrip on a muddy trail requiring boots. We'll seek snapping, map, painted and soft-shelled turtles. I'll also identify vegetation and niches crucial for bird species who must overcome the BP disaster.

Here, white pelicans school fish, great egrets stab frogs, green herons possibly drop bark-bits as bait. Here, common loons and state-endangered Caspian and Forster's terns fish during April; yellow-billed cuckoos pass twigs, mating; least bitterns weave fishing platforms. Here, black terns flew fish-flight displays, and yellow-crowned night herons once performed stick-fidgeting rituals, nesting before flying south to live on intertidal crabs. These and other Aghaming species were found dead and oiled by Deepwater Horizon, according to wildlife collection data, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

We'll likely scope lesser scaup and other waterfowl who rely upon the gulf--a damaged ecosystem even before the spill. Row-crop corn, soybeans, feedlots and other sources already overload the Mississippi with nitrogen and phosphorous and help create hypoxia in the gulf, crippling food chains. The gulf's coastal marshes already lose a football field of acreage every 38 minutes—because climate change raises sea levels, oil and gas industries carve channels through marshes, and levees near the Mississippi's mouth curtail the replenishment of silt.

Science may never completely understand the impacts of oil upon shrimp nurseries, coral reefs, plankton communities, fisheries, sea turtles, shorebirds and seabirds. But Winona-area conservationists can help now, supporting habitat protection here. Nearly 13 million ducks and geese use the gulf some winters, says Ducks

Unlimited. Some breed here. Millions more rely on our wetlands as they continue north. About 40 percent of North America's waterfowl use the upper Mississippi, says U.S.F.W.S.

We'll walk down Prothonotary Trail, gazing at Cerulean Woods and Solitary Slough, places named for two disappearing warblers and a struggling sandpiper who rely upon habitats around the gulf before breeding and migrating here. We'll envision how abundantly passenger pigeons used the river.

While exploring the Mississippi during 1806, Zebulon Pike found their numbers on an island too numerous to imagine. Lafayette Bunnell saw "numberless" near La Crosse circa 1842. In 1853 David Taber, a 14-year old flagman for the Government Survey, arrived at Red Wing from Vermont. A Dakota chief took him upriver to "the finest pigeon pass in the West" to learn to use a rifle. Twenty years later, Taber took his son Ralph ten miles into Wisconsin to a nest colony. Ralph described the outing in 1915 in St. Nicholas Magazine. "Greatly to father's disgust, we found over a score of settlers' wagons scattered through the woods." Men and boys climbed into trees, clubbed and shot chicks and parent birds until "wagons were all loaded with loot."

"I tried to reason with some of those robbers, but it was useless," said Ralph's father. "I wish I might get a law passed...I very much doubt if any of the birds return again." The last nest colony on the upper Mississippi occurred, 1871. The last passenger pigeon died, 1914.

We might feel David Taber's pain this Saturday, but we'll also venture hope, walking amid glistening blue waters and beautiful bluffs, listening to bottomland that helps to mitigate the ugliest oil spill in history, nearly 500 million barrels. We'll celebrate John Latsch's gift where turtles, fish, birds, dragonflies and other miracles sustain themselves, so great grandchildren might appreciate them too.

Richie Swanson, www.WarblingRichie.com, has documented red-shouldered hawk nests at Aghaming since 1994. Info in this story derived from Matter Network, Nature News, The Passenger Pigeon by A.W. Shorger, and "Nitrogen and phosphorus in the Upper Mississippi River: transport, processing, and effects on the river ecosystem," Hydrobiologia 2010, Jeffrey N. Houser and William B. Richardson. The story appeared in the Winona Daily News, April 2011.