

FROZEN RIVER WALK 2008
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Mississippi River Revival, sponsor

About the time river birches turn green, a tiny yellow bird drops from her nest-stump, landing on a dead log at Aghaming Park and Preserve. The female prothonotary warbler flutters strenuously backward, pecking and tugging moss, filling her bill for her nest-cup. Sometimes a house wren slips into her nest-hole first. Look out! The male prothonotary comes dive-bombing, calling sharply, and the two species pop from the stump-hole, streaking through foliage, singing against each other, both needing a cavity for broods.

If you join Mississippi River Revival's Frozen River Walk this Sunday, you'll visit nest-stumps side-by-side, one full of wrens' sticks, the other a prothonotary's nest-site. We'll meet 1:00 PM, Wisconsin side of the Wagon Bridge, and walk 90 minutes through shin-deep snow on current-free ice at places I call Osprey Marsh and Prothonotary Trail. We'll seek signs of wildlife, especially nest remnants, giving kids first chance to discover and ask questions. We'll also quiet ourselves, looking high into trees, so bring binoculars.

Prothonotary warblers symbolize how desperately migratory birds need Aghaming and other protected places here. Prothonotaries winter in mangrove forests 60-90% gone from Central and South America. They breed in mature floodplain forests 90% gone from the Midwest. Twenty percent of their global population breeds on the Lower Miss, and much of the rest migrates our way.

Aghaming easily supports 100 breeding pairs per year, I think—good news to counter bad. The Breeding Bird Survey at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center indicates prothonotaries have declined 39% since 1966. Other warblers using Aghaming decreased even more across their breeding ranges—the Canada, 55%; golden-winged, 61%; bay-breasted, 62%; cerulean, 80%. But everyone who attended a meeting about Aghaming the last few years, shared a viewpoint, looked up research or attended a previous walk can know they helped keep species on Earth, including mink, otters, beavers and Blanding's and other turtles.

"Protect the remaining large, intact ecosystems," says *Birder's Conservation Handbook*, Jeffrey Wells, Princeton University Press. The city's done so, wisely recognizing Aghaming's legal wetland status, installing gates and signs, keeping motorized vehicles out of sensitive habitat March-November, allowing ice-fishing access December-February. Red-shouldered hawks used all of Latsch's gift behind gates this past breeding season. We'll walk where the state-threatened species chased and lambasted owls and Cooper's hawks, apparently protecting young from predators.

We'll pause beneath the courtship limb of the yellow-billed cuckoo, where the cuckoo's "knocker-call" knocks, a male places a twig in a female's bill, and fledglings appear weeks later. The yellow-billed unfortunately lost a petition for Endangered Species Act protection in 1998. The cuckoo's already gone from Oregon, Washington and British Columbia, due partly to losses of shrubs beside creeks and rivers, also a Midwestern problem. Aghaming provided abundant cuckoo territories last breeding season.

The minute we walk down to a slough Sunday, we'll tread migratory feeding grounds of America's most swiftly declining bird and the river's most seriously decreasing duck. Rusty blackbirds declined 99% since 1966, says BBS data. The species concentrates on the Lower Miss during winter. Thousands swarmed Aghaming last spring, finding caddis fly larvae and other food on their way to nest-sites in boreal wetlands, where global warming appears to change water levels and chemistry and food for young, insect populations.

Climate change may also reduce insect prey for lesser scaup—bluebills—on their nesting grounds in western Canadian forests. Bluebills feed at Osprey Marsh and Sam Gordy's every spring. Their continental population dropped from about seven to 3.5 million since 1983, according to *Minnesota Conservation Volunteer*. Some scientists think female bluebills fail to find enough river-shrimp and other food during migration, arrive at breeding grounds so underweight they fail to reproduce. Others think bluebills may ingest too much selenium, a by-product of copper smelting and other industries, when eating Zebra mussels, and high levels may impair egg-laying.

We'll see where tree swallows and catbirds lay eggs, least bitterns weave fishing platforms, yellow-headed blackbirds defend harems, and buttonbush hides hooded merganser chicks. We'll be wildlife Patriots and stand where new, unseemly, Giant power towers might cross the flyway, cutting into swamp white oaks.

The CapX utilities-commission has proposed 345-kV towers up to 175-foot tall, possibly along the river to La Crosse. The lines would rise amid North America's most crucial bird migration corridor. The Upper Miss supports 40% of the continent's waterfowl, nearly 300 bird species in all, and 185 Neotropical migrants, birds breeding on this continent but wintering south of the Tropic of Cancer. A 2005 Forest Service study estimated electrical transmission lines kill 130 million birds per year. BBS data indicates 48 Neotropical species have declined significantly since 1966. Three-quarters of these threatened species use the Upper Miss, so we'll consider impacts at Aghaming, including red-shoulder nests.

A campfire, cookies, hot cider commence at 2:30 PM, Latsch Island Beach. Dress warmly!

*Richie Swanson chronicled nature at Aghaming last year at [RiverBirdBlog](#). His short story *Creator Bird* appears at the current hardcopy and web editions of [www.RavenChronicles.org](#). This story appeared first in the *Winona Daily News*, January 24, 2008.*