

FROZEN RIVER WALK AND DEEPWATER HORIZON

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I felt uplifted about conservation and Aghaming Park and Preserve during last April's Passenger Pigeon Walk. Participants saw bluebills, a declining duck who winters in the Gulf of Mexico and desperately needs cleaner food chains there and on the Mississippi. Ospreys displayed on a nest, continuing to rebound from near-extinction. Three days later, red-shouldered hawks were confirmed breeding deep in Aghaming where off-road vehicles had overrun the floodplain forest the previous year.

People 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 secretly and silently, nearly invisibly, just as her needs demanded. But twelve hours later the Deepwater Horizon well exploded, and the world changed drastically for the river's migratory birds.

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

Mississippi River Revival hosts the fourth annual Frozen River Walk this Saturday, February 5, 1:00 to 2:30 P.M. Please, bring kids and cookies and wear footwear for cold-wet snow (no sneakers). We'll meet at the Wisconsin end of the Wagon Bridge and explore Osprey Marsh, where I'll identify vegetation and niches crucial for bird species who must overcome the BP disaster.

Here, red-shoulders hovered in courtship and caught frogs for nestlings. Here, white pelicans gathered in an Aghaming slough, schooling fish. Here, ospreys nested for the first time following the ban on DDT. Here, green herons crouched at water's edge, and I tried to see them drop bark as fish lures. All these species have been found dead and oiled in gulf areas, according to wildlife collection data compiled by U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

Here, state-threatened great egrets congregated at Aghaming, stabbing frogs and shiners, grunting like pterodactyls. Here, a least bittern wove a fishing platform out of bulrush. Here, herring gulls pumped heads over thawing ice, yelping over rights to dead bullheads. Here, common loons and state-endangered Caspian and Forster's terns fished during April. These bird species were also found dead and oiled.

Here, yellow-billed cuckoos sang "knocker calls," passing twigs during mating rituals. Here, a blue-winged teal sat on a grassy nest, trying to avoid fox predation. Here, pied-billed grebes crooned other-worldly croaks in ghostly fog. Here, black-crowned night herons crept through flooded buttonbush, and black terns flew towering courtship flights, delivering fish to prospective mates. These species were also found dead and oiled.

Yellow-crowned night herons once bred at Aghaming. Wisconsin lists the species as endangered and knows of only six breeding populations in the entire state, according to a DNR fact sheet. The species apparently relies upon crayfish here and crabs in tide pools, mudflats and other coastal environs down south, habitats recently oiled.

No one really knows how many yellow-crowns and other birds Deepwater Horizon has killed or impaired. I hold my breath for ducks. Nearly thirteen million ducks and geese use the gulf some winters, says Ducks Unlimited. About forty percent of North America's waterfowl use the upper Mississippi, says USFWS. Some breed here. Millions more migrate to boreal wetlands which apparently are drying up, changing biologically due to global warming and other human influences.

I won't dwell on oil during the walk. We'll seek signs of otter, fox, mink and beaver, and haunts of snapping, soft-shelled and other turtles. We'll pass a shrub-line where brown thrashers might sing more than a thousand distinct song-phrases during a spring morning-- but, hey, look at the bluff upriver! A few years ago Peregrine falcons returned to a natural nest site there. The species migrates to the gulf and may eat a duck in wetlands still contaminated with oil in 2030. Millions of other raptors, songbirds, terns, gulls and shorebirds attempt to cross the gulf or find food along its perimeter while migrating to South America each year.

I am reminded of the Derek Jeter ad that describes his parents teaching him positive values, faithfully practicing groundballs in a vacant city lot. "Funny, all that time I thought they were talking about baseball," he says. If you're working for conservation around Winona, you're in for a similar surprise. You might think you save bluffs, water quality, fishing sites and beloved views along our beautiful Mississippi. But you're also helping mitigate the ugliest oil spill in history, nearly 500 million barrels. You're helping protect the upper river where species reduced by oil can breed and migrate successfully, giving birds a fighting chance to sustain populations.

END

Swanson maintains www.WarblingRichie.com and works for Mississippi River Revival, an advocacy group sponsoring an annual river cleanup, environmental education, enjoyment and stewardship of the river. The Thirty First Bird Review published his short story "The Reckoning of Injun Joe and Princess Wenonah" last summer.