

EARTH DAY WALK AT AGHAMING

The fifth annual Passenger Pigeon Walk commemorates one bird forever gone from the Mississippi and another at Aghaming Park and Preserve which may benefit from a new endangered species listing.

Mississippi River Revival offers two walks Saturday, meeting at the Wisconsin end of the Wagon Bridge 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. I'll briefly evoke passenger pigeons during the 19th century, and we'll walk one-mile roundtrip, 90 minutes, and visit breeding habitat previously used by the new candidate for protection under Wisconsin's Endangered Species Act, black terns.

Male passenger pigeons—toms—performed "grand wing" displays for hens in the river bottoms until 1871. They perched beside hens, wings flapping, clapping above their backs, slapping branches. Their bodies rose and fell with each stroke, and sometimes millions carried on simultaneously, clucking, creating a raucous rumbling at chains of pigeon-blue islands up to 40-miles long.

Mating lasted about three days, says A.W. Schorger in *The Passenger Pigeon: Its Natural History and Extinction*. Then toms swarmed the ground for nest-twigs, flew up onto hens' backs and passed twigs into hens' bills.

Fortunately black terns still perform courtship rituals at one of Aghaming's remote marshes. They fly herky-jerky flights as high as the bluffs in May. Males catch fish and dragonflies from Aghaming's wetlands and fly across a property line to one of the tern's largest colonies left in Wisconsin. Males approach females, dangling minnows, and if one gets ignored, he sometimes drops his prey and catches it again. After a female accepts his offering, each tern points its bill high, gurgling and rattling urgent messages of pair bonding. Black terns also bring food from Aghaming to nestlings.

We probably won't see a black tern as we walk beside Osprey Marsh, where terns nested during the 1990's. But we'll scope ospreys, who have rebounded so well from DDT their state-threatened status has been dropped.

Not only did humanity almost poison ospreys to extinction. We also once suspected its females of trading you-know-what for fish, which males deliver in screaming fashion, flying in slow descents above females at nests, showing off fish in talons before mating.

We'll provide extra binoculars, so bring kids, please. We'll view a beaver lodge built during last year's flood. The lodge and nearby dikes illustrate how humanity has changed the Mississippi. Dietland Muller-Schwarz in *The Beaver* claimed beaver ponds covered 11 percent of the upper Mississippi's watershed in 1600.

We hope to view sandhill cranes and great egrets (saved by hunting regulations and wetland protection in the early 1900s) and rusty blackbirds (99% diminished, apparently suffering global warming). We'll walk through floodplain forest 90% gone since European settlement--spring habitat teeming with songbirds, mink disappearing beneath nettles, groundhogs munching leaves, turtles basking in sloughs.

Aghaming's forest provides a niche for the state-threatened red-shouldered hawk, who hunts along Prothonotary Trail these days. Red-shoulders prefer invisibility. They'll probably vanish before we see them. Like terns and ospreys, they perform unique courtship rituals. Males fly tight circles above forest canopies, shrieking super-loudly, and females coax them down with muted cries, waiting quietly on perches.

Red-shoulders nest currently in woods once used by off-road vehicles--a major deterrent for the hawk. The city secured these woods from motorized traffic several years ago, putting up signs and barriers. Red-shoulders have taken advantage of the protected habitat, breeding at the particular site for the first time, I believe.

Unfortunately off-roaders continue to risk forest regeneration along the winter access road to Sam Gordy's. Though the road runs through wetlands, the city tries to allow motorized traffic December through February. But no signs or barriers exist to keep vehicles out, and off-roaders entered the wetland forest seven different places this year, including fragile ground supporting old-growth oaks. Vehicles broadened an uncontrolled parking area and spun deep ruts where MRR held the Reconciliation Walk in 2009.

The cooperative agreement between the city and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to manage Aghaming should come to City Council soon. The off-road damage and black terns symbolize its necessity.

Black terns winter as far south as Peru and depend upon declining fisheries and insects impacted by insecticides during migration. They breed in marshes mostly drained from North America, further threatened by exotic carp, loosestrife, canary grass and sediment overloads. Boat wakes, floods on channelized rivers and human-friendly predators like raccoons destroy their nests.

Their favorite habitat at Aghaming adjoins a crucial colony already protected by USFWS. Call it a prophetic partnership, geography and nature predicting a bureaucratic union. But the last time I heard a tern beg, I thought she lobbied for her brood, ample resources for a future generation.

The cooperative agreement should help humans do the same for their descendants, enabling great-grandchildren to learn first-hand and love the same wildlife diversity we cherish today.

Richie Swanson has monitored red-shouldered hawk nests at Aghaming since 1994. Info in this story derives from the Wisconsin DNR and Birds of North America Online.