

Turning No-Man's-Land into a Nature Preserve

By Pamela Eyden

everywhere along their migration route.

This early spring hike starts a new season for the birds and a new one for this seasoned birder as well. Throughout March, April (nesting), May (hatching) and June (fledging), Swanson goes out four to eight hours a day most days of the week. When he gets back to his boathouse, he posts sightings on the E-Bird site online and regularly notifies the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Swanson is meticulous about his records, which he also keeps for cerulean and prothonotary warblers, rusty blackbirds, barred owls, pileated woodpeckers and many other species that live in Aghaming and are suffering population declines. For several years he did a Breeding Bird Census on three separate sites, and published his work. He wrote bird profiles for *Birders World*, but stopped when he began writing River Bird Blog, a blog of natural history at Aghaming (still on his website). He's also written two novels and many short stories. "Fiction wild and rebellious, Ecology accurate and unflinching," promises his website.

Swanson is a tireless hiker, but he doesn't have to set foot

The only way to take care of rare and threatened animals and plants is to take care of the places they need.

Richie Swanson is a river-loving writer who has been watching birds and protecting their habitat on a particular stretch of bottomland forest for more than 30 years.

Swanson starts looking for red-shouldered hawks in the Aghaming Park bottomland forests in March, when they establish their territories. These beautiful and reclusive forest birds migrate from central Mexico and often return to the exact nest or stand of trees where they last raised a successful brood. After making sure no great horned owls are nesting nearby, they repair old nests or build new ones to raise the next season's red-shoulders.

On a bright afternoon this spring, Swanson set off walking down a familiar path through the forest. An icy breeze pushed through the bare trees, some of which were showing buds, but snow still covered the marshes and ice crunched underfoot, plunging a hiker into several inches of very cold water. Swanson thought it might be too early for the hawks, but an hour later he caught sight of the bird's round wings and blunt tail wheeling above the bare branches of the trees.

They're back!

But they don't always return. Last year he found no red-shouldered hawk nests. The birds are vulnerable



Top: Red-shouldered hawks in a nest. (Allen Sheldon)

Above: Richie Swanson. (Pamela Eyden)



Swanson guides field trips every spring in Aghaming Park. (Barbi Bell)

out his door to keep an eye on the birds. Through the picture window of his boathouse on Latsch Island, he can train his binoculars on birds moving in the tall cottonwoods across the back channel in Aghaming. Mallards sometimes lay eggs in a patch of potted hyssop on his deck. Swallows that hunt from a low-hanging branch nailed to the porch are a steady source of entertainment. Elusive prothonotary warblers have been known to nest in a birdhouse on the same deck.

“When I have prothonotary warblers nesting right outside my door and a pair of red-shouldered hawks across at Aghaming, that is a really good year for me!” Swanson exults. His enthusiasm is catching.

“Have you ever watched warblers feeding five young? They’re athletes! Mark Spitz has nothing on them! They zip out to catch bugs, and zip back to the nest, zoom, zoom, zoom!” he said. He went to his computer to check his facts before adding: “I once counted them making 94 trips out and back in 58 minutes.”

“I guess I’m more of a scientist than I thought I was.”

Hearing the Birds

Swanson grew up outside New York City, and first got interested in birds when he was solo-hiking the Appalachian Trail. At day’s end, as darkness closed in, he listened to the songs coming from the forest around him.

“What the heck is that?” I said when I heard my first ovenbird. ‘Teacher-teacher-teacher!’ I couldn’t believe there was so much music out there. It’s so intricate, and I didn’t know what anything was.”

His career as a birder really began when he moved to a boathouse on Latsch Island, on the Mississippi River, near Winona, Minn., in 1987. It was just a few minutes walk across an old concrete bridge to the area called “Aghaming,”

an Ojibwe word meaning “across the water.” Swanson became enchanted with the floodplain forest and all the warblers and nighthawks, yellow-headed blackbirds, black terns, night herons and ospreys. He felt like he’d found a bird heaven.

One day he came across a red-shouldered hawk sitting on a nest.

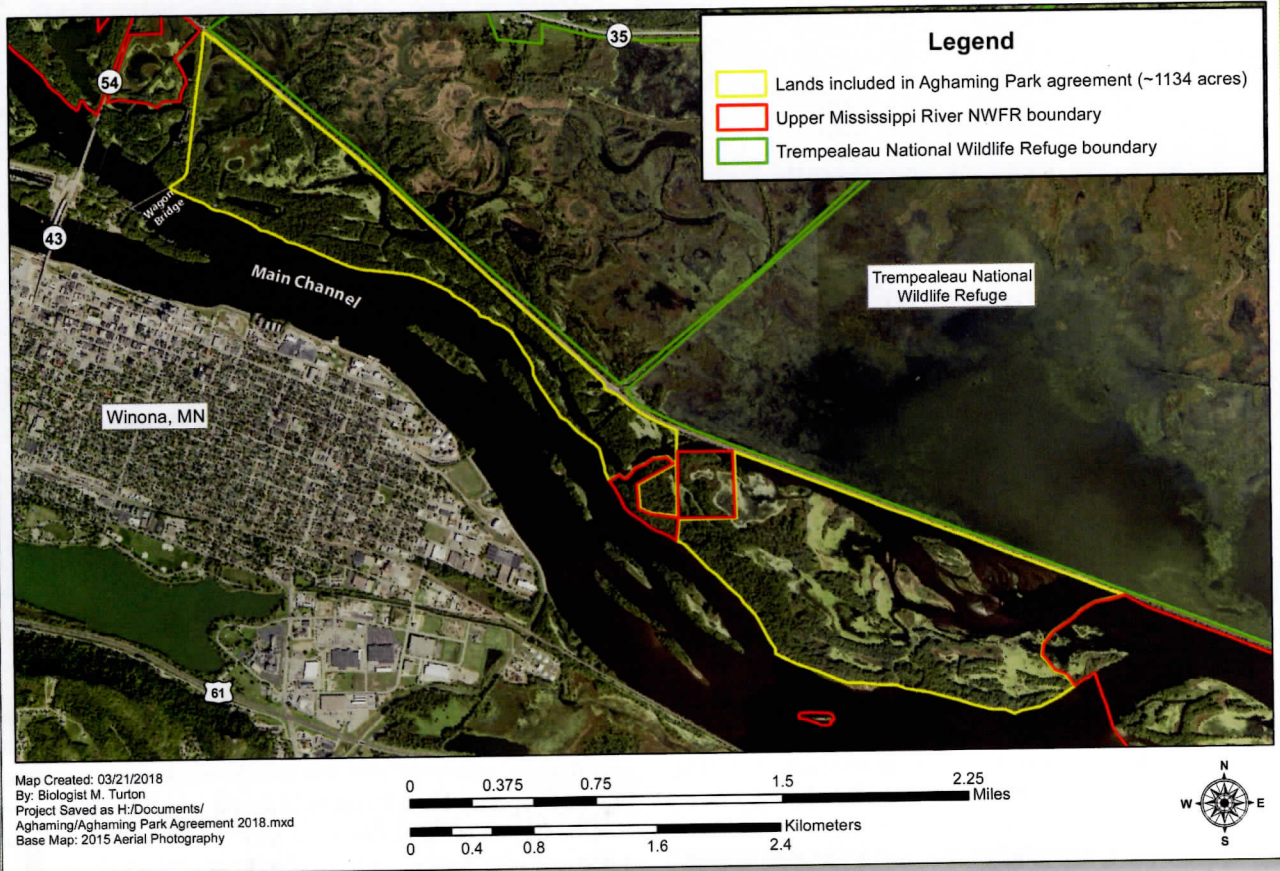
“It screamed at me from directly over my head and scolded me with ‘kip’ calls,” Swanson said. “When you get screamed at that loud, you don’t easily forget it.”



A young red-shouldered hawk looks out from the nest. (Allen Sheldon)



Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge Pool 6



That powerful scolding marked the beginning of a long birding adventure. Just as the red-shouldered hawk was protecting its territory, Swanson set about protecting the woods around it.

Protecting Aghaming

Aghaming Park is an 1,134-acre floodplain forest that was given to the city of Winona in 1915 by grocer-philanthropist John Latsch. It is bordered by the Mississippi River, a railroad dike, the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge, an unmaintained road and the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge downriver. It was an awkward gift, because it's in Buffalo County, Wis., where Winona police have no jurisdiction.

It was mostly used for fishing and hiking, as Latsch wanted, but new roads were being carved into the park, bringing an increasing number of people who wrecked trees and dumped garbage. It was a wild land in both senses of the word — full of forests, marshes and backwater lakes that boats can't get to, hence full of birds and wildlife, but also an ignored and unmanaged place, where some people did whatever they wanted.

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The nest Swanson discovered was high in a tree that was directly above an old power-company road used by off-road vehicles, 75 yards from the park's official access road and 100 yards from an old railroad access road that led deeper into the forest. It was a pretty accessible spot, which made him fear for the birds' nesting success.

Red-shouldered hawks need a lot of forest to themselves. They like to live in floodplain forests, where their diet includes crayfish, turtles, frogs and snakes. They are adept at flying through thick tangles of forest canopy. Their numbers were down in those years, although they've stabilized since, but the bird is still on the Wisconsin list of threatened species, and is a species of special concern in Minnesota.

Finding an active nest was a big deal. Swanson and other birders from the Winona Bird Club began asking the city to erect signs and barriers to keep vehicles out of the woods and away from the nest, but they were ignored. To build awareness he began leading annual public walks through the area in early spring, to show people what's there and why it is valuable. He participated in a foundation-funded planning process in 1998, which recommended

(Aghaming continues on page 41)

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a comprehensive conservation plan to lay the groundwork to protect the area.

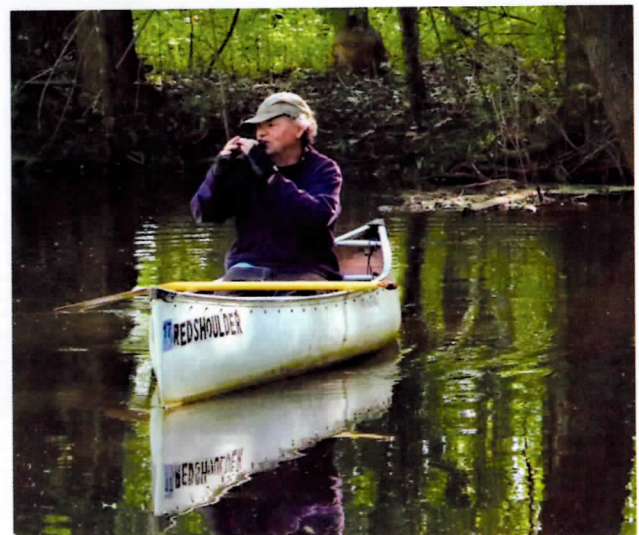
A few years later, the old bridge connecting Latsch Island to Aghaming was repaired and then, despite Swanson's and others' protests, it was restored for vehicle traffic. This made it easier for people to get to their boats in a small private marina and to their traditional ice-fishing spots, but with more people came more damage and garbage.

In 2005 the city decided to transform Aghaming into a nature preserve. It hired an engineering company to survey the area and create an "integrated system of environmental, educational, and recreational opportunities" (*Aghaming Park and Trail System Plan*, Barr Engineering, 2005).

Swanson and others questioned the plan's intention to improve an old road and allow vehicles into the floodplain forest. They pushed for a comprehensive conservation plan. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) disagreed with the city plan's wetland delineation. The city did not adopt the plan.

The restored bridge attracted more people and the damage continued. Swanson formed the Aghaming Conservation Fund and raised \$1,400 for a gate to block vehicle access, but the city declined that gift.

In early March 2009, vehicles turned 25 acres of forest floor into a scarred wasteland, with muddy ruts, spurs and damaged trees. Some had gone farther, tearing through 800



Richie Swanson scans the bottomland forest from his canoe. (Jamie Harper)

acres, disturbing two historic territories of red-shouldered hawk nests.

Swanson called the Wisconsin DNR, who visited the damaged sites and wrote the city a letter explaining its legal responsibility to protect the habitat.

"The city began to understand it lacked the resources

(Aghaming continues to page 43)

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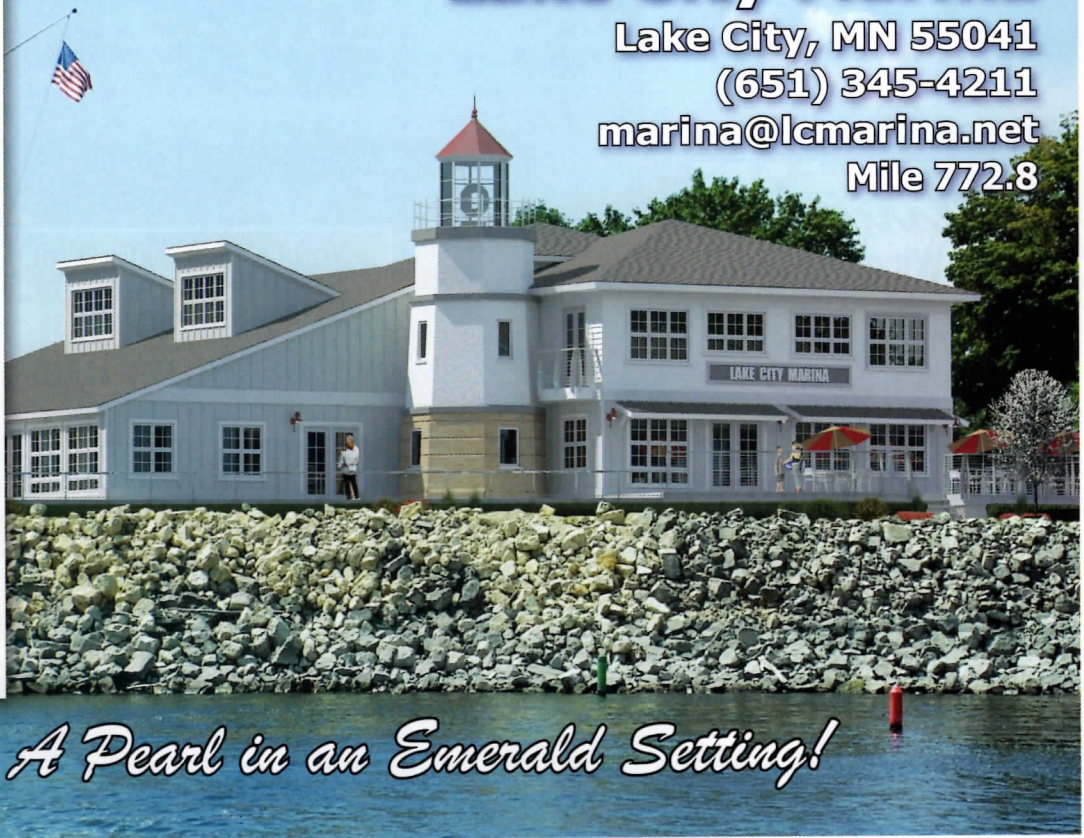
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A Pearl in an Emerald Setting!

(Aghaming continued from page 41)

and expertise to manage Aghaming on its own,” Swanson recalled.

Shortly after that, in 2009, the city contacted Mary Stefanski, district manager of the Winona District of the Upper Mississippi Refuge, to initiate talks about getting help to manage the park. Now, nine years later, the city and the refuge have signed a cooperative management agreement this spring. It’s a huge relief for Swanson.

“I’m a nest protector! What can I say?” he grinned.

Stefanski also regards it as an accomplishment.

“We don’t get the opportunity to manage properties this large on the river anymore. Aghaming is valuable because it is 1,134 acres of floodplain forest, and that’s pretty impressive. It’s also contiguous with Trempealeau Refuge, so it forms a natural corridor for wildlife,” she said. “We’re just connecting the dots.”

The refuge plans no new restrictions on the area. The first order of business is to do a full inventory of the park, which is habitat for a dozen species of concern, besides red-shouldered hawks. There are areas in the park with 60 to 80-year-old silver maples and other trees. The refuge may take on restoration of these areas and try to eliminate invasives, such as Japanese hops and Reed canary grass. And it will promote the canoe trail it established there in 2010.

📄 Visit BigRiverMagazine.com for direct links to websites mentioned in the magazine.



A group of birders visits Aghaming Park. (Barbi Bell)

“There will be a lot of discussion about public use of the area,” Stefanski said.

Meanwhile, Swanson will continue to hike the area and provide information to the refuge staff. He knows the birds in this forest as well as anyone, and better than most.

“Really, I cover just 700 acres,” he said. “I don’t know what goes on in the other part.” 🌿

Pamela Eyden is editor-at-large. Her last story was “Bobcats — Small but Fierce,” January-February 2018.

For Swanson’s profile of red-shouldered hawks, see his story for Birder’s Watch Digest, on his website, [richieswanson.com]. 📄