



FCNA News

Volume 2, Number 3, Fall 2003

Friends of the Campus Natural Areas

Dedicated to the Preservation and Stewardship of our Woodlands, Wetlands, Prairies and Shorelines

Reminiscences of Picnic Point and the Campus Natural Areas

by Laura Erickson

If I had to choose only one place in North America in which I could bird for the rest of my life, I'd choose the Campus Natural Areas. Why am I so smitten?

Perhaps it's because Picnic Point is the first place I ever loved. I was a new birder when I moved to Madison in 1976. My husband was a grad student, I was a teacher, and we lived a few months in Eagle Heights and then in an apartment on University Avenue, both a pleasant walking distance from Picnic Point. There I encountered many birds for the first time—Wilson's Phalaropes spinning like toy tops in the 1918 Marsh, Soras skulking in the cattails in the marshes, Western Grebe and Red-throated Loon and Hooded Merganser swimming and diving in Lake Mendota, Northern Shrike, Golden-winged Warbler, Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill. I even once had a Henslow's Sparrow in the Eagle Heights Gardens. Few places in Wisconsin offer such rich and varied habitat in such a small area.

But even more important than the diversity was the magic of many of the encounters. One December afternoon in 1977, I heard an unfamiliar whistle as I walked toward Picnic Point. I whistled back, and heard an answer. As I drew closer and closer, the bird seemed to be coming closer and closer to me. And suddenly there it was—a young Pine Grosbeak perched atop a tree at the entrance gate. We whistled back and forth a few more times as it hopped lower and lower. I impulsively took off my glove and reached out, and it alighted on my finger. For one magical moment it looked into my eyes, and then hopped back into the tree, whistled a few more times, and flew away.

Three times in my life wild birds have lighted on my hand, all at Picnic Point. The other two occurred on early mornings in spring. One frosty morning a Golden-crowned Kinglet landed on my gloved hand—I wasn't sure if it even realized it wasn't on a twig—and a year or two later a Ruby-crowned Kinglet lighted on my finger. This one did look at me, but it seemed to be moving from branch to branch and my finger happened to be at the right place at the right time.

Early one April morning, hours before Picnic Point opened, I was peering through my spotting scope when a policeman approached. I think he intended to kick me out, but when I noticed him coming, I blurted out that the male Hooded Mergansers were displaying—I'd never seen such a cool thing! He looked through the scope and was equally thrilled. He was a duck hunter, but hadn't spent much time watching ducks in spring. The way these males raised and lowered their striking helmets was beautifully comical. After that, he often waved to me when we passed and sometimes walked over to see what birds I'd been seeing.

Black Terns were once common nesters in the 1918 Marsh. I loved watching them zip about on delicate, silvery wings, and often sat next to the path to watch adults fly in and feed their babies. Black Terns are extraordinarily aggressive defending their nests against intruders, flying straight for the eyes. But they aren't kamikaze pilots—they do veer off at the last moment. I occasionally challenged my junior high students to take 25 steps down a particular path without flinching. A few intrepid boys and girls tried it, but none succeeded. Then I'd do it, trusting in the terns' good judgment. My staying upright in the face of marauding Black Terns never failed to impress even the most jaded kids.

On a May morning birding hike with some of my students, a boy suddenly shouted out, "Mrs. E! Mrs. E! A Prothonotary Warbler!" I birded Picnic Point every weekday morning before school for years and I'd never seen a Prothonotary Warbler. My student didn't have binoculars or a field guide, and the bird flew before anyone else got a look. I gently explained that in early morning the sun casts a golden hue that can make a Yellow Warbler look a bit like a Prothonotary. He looked crestfallen, but at that moment a Prothonotary Warbler sang out across the path. My thrill at getting a lifer and my student's look of vindication made that a doubly joyful moment.

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**Friends of the
Campus Natural Areas**
P.O. Box 55056
Madison, WI 53705

e-mail: rlenehan@chorus.net

www.uwalumni.com/fcna

Officers

President:

Jane Camerini 608-233-1802
jrcameri@facstaff.wisc.edu

Vice President:

Richard McCoy 608-233-5706
rmccoy@facstaff.wisc.edu

Committee Contacts

Newsletter

Roma Lenehan 608-238-5406
rlenehan@chorus.net

Volunteer

Glenda Denniston 608-231-1530
cdennist@facstaff.wisc.edu

Friends of the CNA

is a 501(c)(3) non-profit
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We Welcome Submissions to the FCNA Newsletter and Web Site

The FCNA welcomes the submission of articles and announcements for *FCNA News*. We encourage people to share their checklists and other relevant CNA materials on the FCNA Web Site. For information on submitting material, call Roma Lenehan at 238-5406 or send your articles or checklists to rlenehan@chorus.net. September 15 is the deadline for submissions to the next *FCNA News*.

Fall Field Trips

Additional Field Trips will be posted on the
FCNA Web Site: www.uwalumni.com/fcna

Return of the Natives: the Friend of the CNA's Planting Project

August 16 (Saturday) 10-11:30 AM Meet at the Picnic Point parking lot. Come see the progress our hard-working volunteers have made restoring native plant diversity to Eastern Bill's Woods. Leader: Glenda Denniston (231-1530)

Fall Birding at Picnic Point

September 6 (Saturday) 8:00-10:00 AM (with the possibility of extending) Meet at the 1918 Marsh parking lot. Join us in a search for fall migrants including confusing fall warblers and sparrows. Co-sponsored by Madison Audubon Society. Leaders: Marty Evanson and Roma Lenehan (238-5406).

Bird Banding at the Biocore Prairie

September 13 (Saturday) 8:00-12:00 (come anytime, but earlier times generally net more birds) Rain date Sunday September 14. Come and help celebrate the second anniversary of the Bird Banding Station (including refreshments). Examples of birds we may net are cardinals, sparrows, warblers, waxwings, wrens, finches, vireos, orioles. To get there walk up the hill on the main road from the Picnic Point entrance gate (*do not turn right toward the point*). Follow the middle path and angle right at the first fork and left at the second. Keep going up the hill through the woods and past an open grassy field to the Biocore Prairie where the station will be set up. Leader: Mara McDonald (263-8941).

The Campus Natural Areas: Past, Present, and Future

September 19 (Friday) 4:00 to 5:30 PM Meet at the Picnic Point parking lot. Come learn about the history of the Campus Natural Areas from CNA historian Tom Brock as he leads a walk from Picnic Point to Frautschi Point and back. Leader: Tom Brock (238-5050)

Mushrooms in the CNA Followed by a Mycology ID Clinic in Birge Hall

Come to either or both of these events!

September 27 (Saturday) 10:00-12:00 Field trip: Meet at the Picnic Point parking lot. Leader to be announced.

September 27 (Saturday) 12:30-2:30 Mycology ID clinic: Meet in Room 210 Birge Hall. Leader: Andrea Gargas (262-8644).

Fall is a good time to find mushrooms. We will search for mushrooms on and near Picnic Point and then adjourn to Birge Hall to learn identification techniques. The trip and ID clinic are sponsored jointly by the Friends of the CNA and the Wisconsin Mycological Society-Madison Interest Group.

Help Needed for Expanded Bill's Woods Project

Now that the Friends of the CNA (FCNA) has received permission to expand the Bill's Woods Project, we need your help. We need donations of money and local ecotype plants as well as the help of volunteers to expand and maintain this larger restoration. This spring the FCNA received a five year permit from the CNA Committee allowing it to extend its Picnic Point Entrance Project up to the Upper Bill's Woods Planting Project, creating a single large restoration called the Eastern Bill's Woods Project. Volunteers continue to remove invasive species such as buckthorn, honeysuckle, and garlic mustard and have planted over \$5000 worth of native plants and shrubs in addition to hundreds of donated plants. See this restoration on Glenda Denniston's August 16 field trip (see above).

Ugly Dead Trees

by Glenda Denniston

"I thought they were supposed to be fixing up the woods. Why don't they get rid of some of those ugly dead trees? It's so messy with all those logs and dead branches on the ground. You'd think the first thing they'd do is clean up the debris."

Snags as Wildlife Habitat

Trees which are dying or dead but which remain standing are known as snags. They can remain standing for more than 50 years. Snags, as well as the downed trunks and branches that lie rotting on the ground, provide essential habitat for a diverse set of animals.

Nineteen percent of the 69 bird species documented as breeding in the Campus Natural Areas use holes in trees as their nesting sites (Lenahan, "Breeding Birds in an Urban Natural Area," 2003). These include the primary hole-excavators, our Woodpeckers (Downy, Hairy, Red-bellied, Red-headed and Flicker), and other species such as Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Tufted Titmouse, Wood Duck, Tree Swallow, Great Crested Flycatcher and House Wren, all of which re-use old woodpecker holes or make use of other holes. Studies have shown that nests in holes provide a degree of safety from Cowbird parasitism. For more information about cavity-nesters, see *Cavity-Nesting Birds of North American Forests* by Scott, Evans, Patton and Stone, 1977, on the Web at www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/wildlife/nesting_birds/index.htm.

Some other birds, for example the Indigo Bunting, build nests low in shrubs or weeds but require bare, dead branches of trees to serve as song perches during the breeding season. Large predators such as owls, hawks and Ospreys characteristically hunt from and nest in tall snags, which provide excellent visibility. Hardy songbirds, such as Chickadees and Titmice, need the well-insulated holes in trees for shelter during storms and bitter winter nights.

Other animals, too, make use of holes and the peeling bark of dead trees for shelter. Raccoons, flying squirrels, chipmunks and mice are among the many mammals that rear their young and take shelter in tree holes. Many insects live their entire life in tunnels they make in dead wood, eating the wood and associated fungi and helping to convert these materials into humus. Some insects use dead trees, especially those with peeling bark, primarily during their larval stage. These insects themselves are a major food source for Woodpeckers, Chickadees, Nuthatches, and Brown Creepers, all of which help to control the size of insect populations.



Prime Wildlife Habitat at Frautschi Point

Rotting Logs and Branches

Dead trees continue to provide wildlife habitat long after they have fallen to the ground. Many fungi, which also provide food for wildlife, live on and in dead wood, as do many insects. The holes that were used as dens and nest sites when the trees were snags now are available to ground-dwelling animals such as opossums, foxes, and small rodents. Some amphibians and reptiles, too, are dependent on rotting logs in the woods. Further, rotted wood plays an essential part in the retention of water and the recycling of nutrients in forest soil.

The Health of the Woodland

We are often urged to cut dead branches from living trees and to remove dead trees in order to prevent the spread of disease. In some situations, for example in the presence of oak wilt, this can be good advice, for the larvae of beetles which help spread the disease remain under the bark after the death of the tree.

It may come as a surprise to hear that in many cases the presence of dead and rotting trees contributes to the prevention and control of tree disease. Fascinating recent studies of forest insect dynamics, however, show that this is indeed the case (see, for example, Bull, Parks, and Torgesen, 1999, "Dead and Dying Trees: Essentials for Life in the Forest" at www.fs.fed.us/pnw/science/scifi20.pdf). The question is no longer whether to remove dead trees, but rather, what proportion of dead trees is best for the health of the forest.

Discovering Frogs in the Campus Natural Areas

by Jill Feldkamp

Frogs, like many other animals, persist in the Campus Natural Areas (CNA), despite the small size of the CNA. Frogs face threats in the CNA at all stages of life: egg, tadpole, and frog. Northern leopard frogs and green frogs are the species most likely to be seen in the CNA. Perhaps there are still some chorus frogs, too, although there is little suitable natural open upland habitat left for them in the CNA because the adjoining land is mowed playing fields and paths.

Identifying CNA Frogs

A slender brown or green frog, the northern leopard frog is 2 to 5 inches long and has large, light-edged dark spots and ridges at the junction of the sides and back.



Northern Leopard Frog

being between 3/4 of an inch and 1 1/2 inches long. Their skin is smooth and greenish gray to brown. Dark stripes run through their eyes and along their bodies.

The leopard and green frogs are most often seen along the shorelines where the tall emergent vegetation is interrupted, allowing for their access to the shore. They may also occur within the marsh where open water is present. Chorus frogs are more often heard than seen. These typically call from among the dead cattail stems from last year's growth in the marsh, rather than along the lake.

It is easiest to detect all of these frogs by learning and listening for the mating calls of the males. The leopard frog makes a low, guttural snore which lasts about 3 seconds. It may be followed by a clucking sound. The call of a green frog sounds like the twang of a loose banjo string. The chorus frog call sounds like a fingernail being run along the teeth of a comb and it lasts 1-2 seconds.

Factors Affecting Frog Populations

Loss of natural upland habitat is one reason for low abundance or absence of frogs in this area. The 1918

Marsh is still an adequate breeding site, but frogs need both natural upland and wetland habitat to eke out a living. The one exception to this may be the green frog, which is a shoreline-dependent species. The green frog has the best opportunity for survival here because the shorelines are mostly natural in the Campus Natural Areas, and at least adults of this species do not need to venture far from water for their survival. In a truly natural area, juvenile green frogs move to the adjoining prairies or meadows to forage, presumably to avoid competition with adult green frogs. The small amount of suitable upland habitat may limit their numbers.

In addition, frogs are sensitive to drought, especially during the mating season. Our dry spring in 2003 caused concern that frogs in our area would not survive and mate, but the late rains triggered a number of the early breeders to begin chorusing. Females who do not breed reabsorb their eggs. What is not known is how long females hold their eggs before beginning to reabsorb them. If they started to reabsorb their eggs before the rains came, then the males called in vain. The rains may have come early enough to allow some reproduction of the early spring breeders. This situation probably was not as critical for frogs in the CNA as it was in other areas, for there are more permanent water sources here than in many places. Still, dry conditions are detrimental to frogs, and populations may have been lowered due to recent droughts.

In addition to habitat quality and water availability, frogs are also sensitive to water pollution because their eggs and tadpoles develop in shallow water. The CNA has a grant to address water quality issues in this increasingly urban watershed.

Frogs eat insects and in turn are eaten by fish, birds, and mammals at various stages of frog development. When frog numbers are high, herons and egrets are sometimes attracted to the marsh.

Next spring, go out and listen for these hidden songsters.

Sandhill Cranes Breed in Bay Marsh

For the first time in over a century, Sandhill Cranes successfully bred in the CNA. A Crane pair raised a single colt in the University Bay Marsh. Some people observed the pair dancing in the 1918 Marsh in May. In June and early July the pair was seen with their chick. This pair or another pair defended a territory in the Bay Marsh in 2001 and 2002, but left by mid-May. Wisconsin Sandhill Crane populations have made a dramatic recovery from near extinction in the 1930s.

Thank You

The Friends of the CNA want to thank all the donors and volunteers who help make our work a success.

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Major donors donated more than \$100 since October 2001.

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New Memberships Matched

A very generous anonymous donor continues to match new membership donations up to \$100 and increases in membership up to \$100 per member. This gift will be used to establish a Special Fund that the Friends can use for the long-term benefit of the CNA.

Join the Friends of the Campus Natural Areas

Name _____ Student \$10

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Please send me information about how to volunteer Patron \$100

(Include your email address and telephone number if you would like to volunteer) Other _____

Mail your check payable to Friends of the CNA with this form to: FCNA, P.O. Box 55056, Madison, WI 53705

Your donation is tax deductible to the full extent of the law.

New member donations up to \$100 will be matched by an anonymous donor

Reminiscences (continued from page 1)

A few of my moments at Picnic Point were more somber. When I was troubled, I always headed there as my refuge. During long walks along the shore of Lake Mendota, Orioles caroling from the tall trees overhead, Redstarts singing in the honeysuckle, Soras calling from the cattails, Ovenbirds shouting from the woods, these sounds and sights soothed my soul. Late one September afternoon, after driving back from my father's funeral in Chicago, I headed to Picnic Point to be alone with my thoughts. Four Buff-breasted Sandpipers on the field by the 1918 Marsh walked quietly along with me for a stretch, and I felt far less alone for their soothing presence.

One winter morning when I was optimistically scanning the ice on Lake Mendota for Snowy Owls, I was shocked to see what looked like the Statue of Liberty sunken into the frozen lake. Later that day I learned that it had been put there by a whimsical student government. Many spring and summer mornings bird songs kept time with the rowing crew. I always encountered at least a few people jogging or running and there were even the occasional picnickers who gave the place its name. I've never found another place that so perfectly blended the human and the natural.

A few weeks before I was to move from Madison in March, 1981, I tallied up my Picnic Point list and discovered that I'd seen 199 species there. Searching through the checklist, I realized that Screech Owl wasn't on it, despite my habit of checking several cavities and Wood Duck boxes whenever I passed them. So my dear friend Frank Freese took me out one night with a tape recorder. Each time he played a Screech Owl call, one or more Screech Owls called back. After trying this at many different spots, we figured between 14 and 18 different Screech Owls had answered.

It was hard leaving Madison. I had to say goodbye to my students, my birding buddies, and my beloved Picnic Point. I've visited a few times since, adding Mute Swan and Blue-winged Warbler to my tally and reassuring myself that, although my students had grown up and Frank Freese had passed away, Picnic Point remains pretty much the way I left it. Picnic Point is a rare treasure, enriching the lives of Madisonians of all species. Long may it flourish.

Laura Erickson lives and writes in Duluth, Minnesota. She produces "For the Birds," a public radio program about birds, and writes for Journey North, an educational web site about bird migration.

FCNA

P.O. Box 55056
Madison, WI 53705