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Friends of the Campus Natural Areas

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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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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.

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