



CENTER LINE

A Publication of Waukesha County's Retzer Nature Center

Spring 2009

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- ◆ How to Help Birds in Your Backyard, March 11
- ◆ Morning Bird Hikes Fridays in April, May & June
- ◆ Earth Week Activities April 19 - 25

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CROAKING — THE ONLY WAY TO GO

Reprinted from Center Line 1999. One of the many Articles and Poems by Shirley Blanchard from her latest book, See You on the Trail, Looking into the Nature of Things currently sold at the Retzer Nature Center Gift Shop.

“Mister Froggy went a court-in’ and he did ride mm mm,” beginning words to an old folk song calling attention to a little creature who begins courting in early spring and makes no bones about it. What a racket he can make! If you take walks during those warm days of spring and wander near marshy areas or small ponds or even roadside ditches, you will hear incredible sounds as you amble along. Finding the players in this noisy orchestra is difficult, however, even though the members may number in the hundreds. Mating calls sometimes become deafening. Come spring, these tiny creatures are going to croak loud and long for their sweethearts.

In Grimm’s folk lore, there is a fairy tale called The Frog Prince or The Frog King, depending upon how uppity one wishes to be. Anyway, the story follows—the princess loses her golden ball in a deep pool and asks the frog who lives there to retrieve it for her. The princess promises the frog all manner of material things, but her replies, “I do not care for material things, but if you will love me and let me be your companion always, I will find the golden ball for you.” Which he does, the princess promising. But you know how princesses can be—as soon as they get what they want, they forget their promises. Nevertheless, in concluding, the frog jumps his way into the palace and complains to the king. The princess is ordered to keep her part of the deal. In trying to do so, the frog becomes so icky to the princess when she holds him in her hand, that she flings him onto the wall with all her might, breaking him into pieces. He definitely croaked at that time; but somehow, someway, as the frog pieces fell to the floor, they attached again to become a handsome prince or king. Whatever! The Brothers’ Grimm live up to their name in this fairy tale. The story, however, may be the first written account of a frog being harbinger of future calamities in nature’s wetland environment.

The frog is one of the peculiar tiny creatures known as amphibians (from a Greek word *amphi* meaning both and *bios* meaning life). This little guy undergoes a metamorphosis and literally does lead a double life. Beginning as an egg, the frog is born in water; he breathes with gills, and swims with a tail and fin. Now a tadpole, he matures and develops lungs. His tail and fin are replaced with legs and wonderment—the frog becomes a land traveler. His vegetarian diet now becomes an animal one, and the mature frog becomes a creature of both land and water. Winter is the hardest time for a frog. He is unable to regulate his body temperature, so winter brings on hibernation. Frogs spend winter under the mud at the bottom of ponds. The true frog has many blood vessels under his skin. While hibernating, he is able to absorb oxygen needed to survive directly from the water through his skin.

(Croaking... continued)

But with the first signs of spring, refusing to be a stick-in-the-mud, he vocalizes in spring showers. He is awake and ready to date!

Delving into frog research, I was startled by the variety of Wisconsin's frogs. Included in the category of true frogs (*Rana*) there is the Green Frog (*Rana clamitans*), the Pickerel Frog (*Rana palustris*), and the Wood Frog (*Rana sylvatica*). Also there is the Mink Frog (*Rana spetentrionalis*), and the Northern Leopard Frog (*Rana pipiens*). A small wonder there is so much noise down by the pond where all meet for skinny-dipping. All but the Wood Frog, that is. He does his croaking off in damper woodlands.

The mating call of the male Bullfrog, (*Rana catesbeiana*) is a deep, harsh and loud "jug-a-rum" that can drown out the calls of all the other species. The gentlemen Bullfrogs sing solos rather than join in choruses like other pond frogs. His to-be ladylove, waiting in the weeds must think—now there is my strong and handsome prince!

Among Wisconsin's frogs, there are some who are untrue. The untrue frogs' lifestyle is just a bit off the edge—of the pond, that is. This category Treefrog (*Hyla*) includes the Spring Peeper (*Hyla crucifer*), and the Gray Treefrog (*Hyla versicolor*). Where true frogs lack toe pads and have moist skin, Treefrogs have enlarged toe pads—big suction discs that enable the animals to walk or cling on a vertical surface. Treefrogs are usually a bit smaller than the true frogs. Treefrogs are adapted to cling onto vegetation, while true frogs are adapted to live in the ponds and lakes. Among untrue frogs we have to include the Striped Chorus Frog (*Pseudacris triseriata*), a very tiny animal (3/4 to 1 1/2 inch) that inhabits grasslands or wooded swampy areas. When the males go courting, however, they trek down to the pond and produce a near deafening clamor. As the saying goes—he's little but he's loud. Although this species is in the Treefrog kin, Chorus Frogs are nearly webless and lack suction pads in their anatomy.

The Northern Cricket Frog (*Acris crepitous*) is not your run-of-the-pond type frog either. Although he will jump into the water quickly if disturbed, the Cricket Frog will turn underwater, then swim back to shore at a different point. Cricket Frogs also

reside at edges of ponds, ditches or streams and court their ladies with a melodious cricket sound. However, some folks say their melody sounds more like the clacking of two stones together. Whatever the noise, it seems to be pleasing to the female Cricket Frog.

The sounds of croaking are the sounds of Spring. Spring Peepers are the earliest vocalizers. Then the calls of the Wood Frogs are heard followed by the Pickerel, Leopard and Cricket Frogs. After these species have made their voices heard, time has come for the Green Frog and the Bullfrog to make their statements. Last, but not least, to croak in the springtime is the Mink Frog. All are native to Wisconsin.

I have been remiss on coloration of the various frogs. This subject could take on several chapters and become boring for the reader. Frog color varies from grays to greens, from browns to yellows. Frogs are spotted, speckled, mottled and striped. They have variegated squares and circle patterns, line and stars. All this configuration varies with species.

Skin coloration can change with the temperature of the frog's surroundings. Frogs are difficult to see, as they blend into their environment. If one is further piqued by the little critters, open *Amphibians of North America* by Hobart M. Smith and study the color plates. This will pinpoint identification.

The best way to identify frogs is learning to recognize their voices through recordings. Each species has a distinctive anuran call. Some frogs have a habit of counter-calling. This is when two or more alternate voices, each taking turn, make it easier for a lady frog to locate her prince charming. Love follows mysterious patterns. Hopefully, like the old folk songs and fairy tales, love will find a way. Even if one has to croak for it!

See you on the trail,

Shirley Blanchard

REFERENCES:

Amos, William H. (1967). *The Life of the Pond*. New York-Tronto-London. McGraw-Hill.

Dickerson, Mary C. (1969). *The Frog Book*. New York, NY. Dover Publications.

Readers Digest. (1982). *North American Wildlife*. Pleasantville, NY.

Blanchard, Shirley. (2008). *See You on the Trail, Looking into the Nature of Things*. USA. Poetry People Press.

HEARTWOOD



Destination Friday!

Somewhere to the south,
restless legions are in relentless motion,
headed this way.
Don't bother them. Don't get in their way.
Don't distract them. Don't delay them.
They have an appointment, as it were,
with destiny.
They have a promise to keep.
They must not be late.

Their appointment is to arrive precisely at
43 degrees 0 minutes 56 seconds north latitude,
88 degrees 18 minutes 41 seconds west longitude,
at precisely 7 am (or a little later),
consistently,
on every Friday in April, May, and June.

Their destiny is
to be anticipated, pursued, listened to, and ultimately observed,
to be the object of much expectation and suspense,
and ultimately of marvel, awe, and delight,
to be the focus of much comparison, inference, and discussion.

Their promise is
to act, simultaneously,
as a vehicle of discovery and satisfaction,
and as a call to arms,
a herald's cry to save the natural habitat they depend upon,
before it's gone!

At 7 o'clock every Friday morning in April, May, and June, I lead a band of explorers into the hinterlands of Retzer Nature Center's 400 acres, to seek and find the returning Birds of Spring. We go armed with binoculars and field guides, and with our eyes and ears and minds. Under the guise of a morning birding trip, what we actually do is take the pulse of the land as a new year of life breaks upon the landscape. You see, the birds would not just be present (like a scene change in a play), without the concurrence of co-conspirators. The days lengthen, and the sun rises earlier and arcs higher in the sky, and the temperature warms. In response to all this, the buds on the trees open, and the new leaves and flowers expand. With the banquet table set, a horde of tiny plant-eating insects sweeps out among the new foliage. They, in turn, are the banquet table set for the successive waves of arriving birds—either returning for the summer, or passing through on their journey farther to the north. Either way, our morning expedition tries to show-up in what's

hopefully the right place at the right time—exploring along our pre-determined clock-wise route, through a variety of habitats, doing our best to keep the rising sun at our back. Not that the sun is always out, you understand, especially on those first Friday mornings in April...but hope does spring eternal, and persistence is always rewarded!

Although our morning explorers are a light-hearted and friendly band occasionally given to chit-chat, we have a cheerfully applied rule—the quieter we are, the more birds we'll see. Our common interest is not to just identify the birds, life-list style. Rather, it's to enjoy the birds we see, to make sure everyone in the group gets to see them, to understand why each bird is identified as this particular species and not some other, to appreciate which birds are found in which habitats, and to learn how land management affects which birds will arrive, and which birds will stay. We make suggestions about which field guides and binoculars work best, and we have binoculars that folks can try. We welcome beginners, and families with kids. We charge a whole dollar per person, which is only collected after we actually see birds. We always conclude with a quick hike's-end review of the birds we've seen. And we're always done promptly at 8:30, so no one is late for work!

As I write this, snow is on the ground, and the Birds of Spring are on their winter range far away. But as you read this, their return is on the horizon—the southern horizon, to be specific—and getting closer, day by day. Come join us here at Retzer, at 7 a.m. on all the Fridays in April, May, and June—and experience with us the return of the Birds of Spring!

Larry



The Last Prairie



Auld Lang Syne: The Retzer Nature Center Performance Summary

Should old acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? Of course not, nor should past endeavors be unknown to our readers. The following paragraphs “paraphrase” some of what we have been up to in the past years and will provide you with a spring guide to areas of note around the nature center. We cannot include everything that goes on here in the span of a year or three. All the subtleties would take the entire issue, or two issues, or a short story, a book, perhaps a three-volume set... depending on the level of governmental intricacy you desire. Of course, there is no room for all of that here. This article is therefore devoid of nuance! But since that sounds so negative think of it as “straight to the point,” which seems both worth your valuable time and exciting to boot.

Let us begin as you do when you visit us by turning onto the entrance drive. Take a moment to glance to your right as you drive past the sign. About 200 feet to the west is a very young planting covering one of our 400 or so acres. Planted in July with a seed mix for moist areas, many seedlings were already showing themselves in early August. With luck, all 48 species will bloom in the next 10 years (most should flower before then, but certainly not all). You probably will not notice much throughout 2009 but at this stage, this wet meadow is one of our most successful stands. It is certainly the most diverse. Keep your eye trained on it in the years to come.

As you continue down the drive, the prairie growing alongside it will be in its fourth growing season and showing more diversity. In spots, this community is just in strips about 20 feet wide. In other areas it stretches to ten times that. There are 3 types of prairie mixes throughout these roadside and median plots, to

accommodate varying wetness. The hillside right in front of the building is also one of these mixes and planted in 2005 just like the others.

After you finish parking the car in a sunny spot (all the shaded ones were taken) let's hit the trails!! Wait, that was overly enthusiastic. It approaches that point of the textual nausea that you find in brochures and advertisements that are selling something. Since we are not selling, here is another try: (in a 'Winston Churchill' voice) "If you would be so kind as to pick up your feet and accompany me on the Retzer Pedestrian Trailway (RPT for short). Chop, Chop! Healthy citizens are the greatest asset any country can have." OK, so that last sentence actually was a Winston Churchill quote but it seemed polite enough. Make certain the windows are cracked, no CDs on the dashboard and nothing valuable is in plain sight. Here we go, don't forget your keys!

At the trailhead sign, get your bearings and head to the Red Trail. As you cross the tractor lane, notice the ugly, brown reed canary grass to your right. This old Fen Demonstration planting got away from us but it will demonstrate yet again! Two applications of approved-for-over-water-use glyphosate (the same stuff that is in Round-Up™) herbicide killed most of the exotics. One more application this spring will give it that technical knockout punch. We will then use the reed canary grass against itself. It will perform moisture retention and soil stabilization for us as "standing straw" when we plant this site in late spring. Some cutting and selective weed control over the next five years should have this area looking fen-like again.

As you turn your head away from the reed canary graveyard in utter disgust, continue along the Red Trail until it connects to the Green Trail (the "Outer Loop"). Take the Green Trail through the forest until it breaks the daylight (an old football colloquialism) into the Field of Dreams and intersects with the Winter Trail, dashed red line on your Retzer Nature Center Map. Take a right on the Winter Trail and head south. When the trail turns to the east, you are at the southwest corner of our newest Legacy Forest plot. This is the second acre of prairie groundlayer we have planted in the Field of Dreams, which we put in this past summer. Again, be patient. You might catch a glimpse of a Black-eyed Susan or Evening Primrose flower in 2009, but that is about it. Look on this as a chance to witness the birth of a prairie; something that would normally take centuries.

Take the Winter Trail around to the Outer Hiking Loop again and head back to the building. Look over your left shoulder as you cross the paved Adventure Trail. We are working to rid the area of Common Buckthorn, honeysuckle and other invasives. The Butterfly Garden is nearly complete and we also added dozens of transplants to fill the gaps. Also around the building, we leveled the trail north of the Pergola near the Oak Opening Demonstration. A lot of effort put the large retaining boulders on the eastern side of the path. There are a couple of "bottom-shaped" rocks for you to sit on, once the grass has established. They need some names like "The Sedimentary Seat," "The Real Hard Rock Café" or perhaps something with a little imagination. Get to work! You have the entire spring thaw to think about this. We are also using the trail change to expand the Oak Opening. We already have some installments of Little Bluestem to take up the charge.

That's a wrap! We hope you enjoy our achievements here at Retzer Nature Center. In the future, if you ever wonder just what the heck we are doing, ask us. We will do our best to give you a straight answer and we might even include a verse from an old Scottish poem.

Mike

New Books Not Used In This Article but You Should Know About Anyway:

Black, M. R. and E. J. Judziewicz. (2008). Wildflowers of Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest. Stevens Point, WI. Cornerstone Press and University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Press.

(Right now the only place that has copies to my knowledge is the Prairie Enthusiasts website: <http://www.theprairieenthusiasts.org/merchandise.htm>)

Hipp, A. L. (2008). Field Guide to Wisconsin Sedges. Madison, WI. The University of Wisconsin Press.





RETZER NATURE CENTER

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Return Service Requested

Friends of Retzer Annual Meeting

Please plan to join us for the Friends of Retzer Annual Meeting on Monday, April 27, 2009 at 6:00 P.M. at Retzer Nature Center. An excellent free Gourmet Chili Dinner (meat lovers and vegetarian style) will be served. There will be a short State of the Friends Annual Report and election of Board Members. Please come and hear about our 2008 accomplishments and the exciting plans for 2009.

Following the short meeting we are pleased to announce the return of one of our most popular Guest Speakers, Dr. Phil Pellitteri, UW Extension Entomologist.

To ensure that everyone has enough chili, please make a dinner reservation by calling Retzer Nature Center at 262-896-8007 and bring a healthy appetite. Be sure and specify if you prefer meat or vegetarian chili. Please also indicate if you would be willing to bring a dessert for five people.

This is a Friends membership event, however new members are always welcome. Due to the popularity of our guest speaker, we suggest that you make your reservation early. If you cannot make the Chili dinner but would like to hear Dr. Pellitteri's presentation please indicate that and plan to arrive by 7:00 P.M.

A Sincere Thanks to All...

The following individuals or groups have donated to Retzer Nature Center since the last issue of CENTER LINE. Their support is greatly appreciated.

- Cash donation from SUM-MER DEL Garden Club
- Cash donation from Elmbrook Garden Club
- Cash donation received from J. B. Schroeder
- Cash donation from Mrs. Una G. Becker in memory of Earl Becker
- Cash donations in memory of Carl Manak from Mr. & Mrs. Alan Schulthess, Mr. & Mrs. Robert Manak, Mr. & Mrs. Richard Behrens, Ms. Ann Behrens and Mrs. George Kastenzholz.