



# CENTER LINE

A Publication of Waukesha County's Retzer Nature Center

Winter 2009

## In this issue...

- ◆ Wintering Blues
- ◆ Déjà vu
- ◆ "Queen" of the Prairie

## Upcoming Events:

- ◆ Issues Forum - Dec. 4  
"Development"
- ◆ Winter Wildlife on Snowshoes -Saturdays in Jan. and Feb.
- ◆ JanBoree - Jan. 25
- ◆ Wild Winter Nights Feb. 7

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## WINTERING BLUES

For twelve years, beginning Spring, through Fall ending, the small songbirds made our rural backyard – HOME. Arriving in early March, bird couples selected homesites, raised families – at times, two or three families, in a fast paced year. Twelve years of enjoyment was shared in the company of these captivating creatures. Unlike relatives, who sometimes stayed past their welcome, the beautiful songbirds never wore theirs out. Yearly visits are sorely missed now that I have moved back into the big city. With this in mind, during these cold and dreary winter months, research on the captivating creatures can be written out for the shut-in spirit.

*Motacilla sialis* was the first scientific name given for the birds by Carolus Linnaeus in 1758. The Swedish biologist figured these beauties were related to a group of semi-colorful birds called wagtails, found in Europe and Asia. Later, 1827 in fact, William Swainson changed their name when he realized the birds were related to robins, not wagtails. Swainson then gave them a new genus by replacing the last letter of the species I. D. *sialis* to the new genus *Sialia*. As of today, the scientific Name of the Eastern Bluebird remains *Sialia sialis*. *Sialis* is a Greek word meaning a "kind of bird," and the Eastern Bluebird is the kind of bird all avid bird watchers want to see about.

Henry David Thoreau remarked, "the bluebird carries the sky on his back." Plumage of the male eastern bluebird, which covers his head, back, wings and tail, is a striking azure blue. Neck and breast feathers are reddish brown. Rusty-brown plumage also blends along the flanks of the bird. His belly is white. This small, six-and-a-half inch adult male, splendidly clothed, sports large sparkling-black eyes, and he can perform a soft and cheerful song for any audience. The female is more subdued in color, blues being more grayish and the rusty tints of her plumage of lighter shades. Her white-eye circle is a distinctive feature.

All three bluebird species in the world occur in North America. Early arrivals to America had never seen the bluebird species before. The colonists looked at the bluebird, and as it appeared to them similar to the European robin, they called it a blue robin. The Robin call was not too far out in left field, because the bluebird and the European robin, are team members of *Turdidae*, which is the scientific family name for the clan of thrush. Who would have thought, in the name of serendipity! The early 1700's caught Mark Catesby, an English artist, producing one of the first field guides, Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands. In his two-volume guide, he not only described, but illustrated, the undiscovered native birds of America. Among the pages, the Eastern Bluebirds made their debut. In his publication, Catesby called the colorful robin the Blew Bird. Yes, the bird was on its way, but spelling was confusing in the old days too.

(Wintering Blues... continued)

Unique information concerning the Blew-feathered friends: two percent of North American bird species have blue feathers. The larger, in fact, the 98 percent group, have yellow, red, black, grey, or even brown feathers. All birds in the 98 percent group contain pigments of these colors in their feathers. This is not true for the bluebirds. There is no blue pigment in the feathers of any blue bird throughout the world. And why is this? Well, if I have this straight, blue color is caused by scattered light waves in the feather cells. Using a microscope, light scattering cells show a dark pigment sandwiched between two layers of hollow, tubular cells. When light enters the cells, pigment absorbs most of the light wavelengths. The remaining light-blue light – scatters and is reflected back to our eyes. An optical illusion is created that makes the feathers appear blue. Intensity of the blue color of the bird changes with the amount of sunlight, and the time of day. On cloudy days, or when the sun is low, the blue is less intense. Under a direct sun, especially at noon, the blue will be spectacular.

An interesting note on the small Blew-bird: the male bluebird has a well-developed voice box called a syrinx, which enables him to be a crooner in the family. His song is soft and sweet, and the females of the species will listen with calculating ears, as he serenades from a high perch. His song is louder if he is in a courting mode. His amazing songs are produced, however, without opening his mouth. Guess he will always be able to get his word in edgewise, no matter what. Both sexes do have personal calls for other family communication or emergencies.

In the USA, our native bluebirds are named for their ranges. In addition to the Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), we have the Western Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) extending its range far into Mexico, and the Mountain Bluebird, (*Sialia currucoides*). Concerning the Mountain Bluebird, the species name refers to an Old World warbler - a species *curruca*. This scientific name means "looks like the Lesser Whitethroat." Nothing comes easy in name selection for the small bluebirds. Bird groups, at times, develop characteristics relative to the regions they inhabit. Ornithologists get excited over this, and divide the species into subspecies by adding a third name (after the genus and species names). So far, the

Mountain Bluebird has been lucky with this arrangement. The Western Bluebird, unfortunately, has gained seven known subspecies names, and the Eastern Bluebird wins with eight subspecies listed on his certifications. Frankly, this is too much name calling for the average birdwatcher.

Spring migration brings the bluebirds back to Wisconsin. It's business as usual, and my breath is always taken aback with the first sightings! Bluebirds are cavity nesters without beak strength to construct homes. Before man-made boxes, they had to depend on vacant woodpecker holes or natural cavities in trees for nest building. The male bluebird stakes out his territory and points out several sites for home location. His mate will pick one that pleases her. She is sole nest builder, using dried grass, pine needles, plant stalks, or other natural available materials. Her nest is shaped into a bowl-like hide-a-way. She uses her chest and belly to do this, lining the nest cavity with finer grass to make it cozy for the chicks. With typical male macho, her mate will bring in a strand or two, move the grasses around, maybe throw out a blade or two. Then the male bluebird approves her homemaking. Occupancy is ready for a new family.

Female bluebirds will lay a single egg each day – usually up to a total of 4 or 5 eggs. Eggs are light blue, but sometimes may be white. Incubation begins after the last egg is laid. During this period, female bluebirds lose down feathers on their belly and lower chest. Bare spots become vacillated with arteries and veins, and maintain temperatures around 97 degrees Fahrenheit. The bald areas generate perfect temperatures for warming eggs. Female bluebirds are full-time incubators. The bare spot is called a brood patch. After breeding season, the bare area will again grow feathers. At times the female will have to leave the nest, to eat and drink, stretch, and have a potty break. During her absence, the male takes charge. He will perch on the side, in view of the nest, and watch for predators, showing much agitation until her return. Upon returning, the female will rearrange nesting material, carefully turn the eggs to warm them evenly, then resume her position. Average incubation time for Eastern Bluebirds is 12-14 days.

Bluebirds will hatch blind, with eyes sealed shut, naked and helpless, a condition called "altricial." Baby birds have scraped their way out of their shells with the aid of an egg tooth, the hardened tip at the end of the upper

bill. With special neck muscles and the aid of the egg tooth, chicks rub against the inside of the eggshells until a weak spot is formed to make a break. Energy used to accomplish this leaves the chicks completely exhausted, and the egg tooth is worn or broken away. It takes about 5 days for the naked babes to grow enough feathers to maintain body temperatures. Mama bluebird must keep them warm in the meantime, in the process called brooding. Mouths of the chicks are bright yellow inside, with yellow rims. Every beak in the nest opens wide. Parents have their work cut out for them. The pantry is open and flying around them. Bluebirds feed the young, small insects, during this time.

After 12-15 days birds are fully active, stretching and preening wings. Days 16-17 find the young peeking out of the cavity entrance, and parents outside calling. By day 18, hatchlings have outgrown their home, and know it's time to leave. Once leaving the nest, they will never return. Now they are fledglings; this is defined as birds that have left the nest, but are still dependent on parents for food and protection. Does that sound familiar to all who have raised children! Once the bluebirds can gather food on their own, they are called juveniles. As the birds molt their plumage in the Fall, they finally become adults. During this seasonal transition period, they have been known to drive their parents crazy, and birdwatchers will enjoy every minute of the drama. Fledglings start small, are grayish in color, and sport white spots on back and wings. Beaks are still yellow rimed. Blue and rust shades will appear on growing fledglings at two weeks. Parents do not have to teach the kids to fly; the ability is hard-wired in the genes. Youngsters, none-the-less, strengthen their wings and, hone needed hunting skills, to reach higher perches, to dive for airborne insects, or to run down a grasshopper for dinner. Practice will make perfect.

Parents of the fledglings will be pleased, and backyard birdwatchers once again will have been enchanted among the "bluebirds of happiness."

See you on the trail,

*Shirley Blanchard*

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# HEARTWOOD



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## Déjà vu

The annual Apple Harvest Festival has been accomplished for another year.

This year's festival (the 22<sup>nd</sup> one so far, and my 20<sup>th</sup> since coming to Retzer!), was an occasion for superlatives—with record income (over \$35,000!), the second-largest attendance ever (over 1400 cars!), record apple sales (200 bushels, over \$7000!), record pie sales (500 pies, over \$7500!), second-highest food sales ever (over \$5700!), record beverage sales (over \$1000), and record kids activities and hayride (over \$4200 combined!).

I have expressed my sincere Thanks to Volunteers and Staff, for another wonderful, unselfish, incomparable job. And I express my sincere Thanks here, to all of you reading this, who were part of the festival. I conclude, after all this time, that the Apple Harvest Festival really has struck a chord in our community. As dramatically as the festival has grown in 22 years, somehow it manages to remain fundamentally the same. I marvel at this fact, and I also sort of fear it—because our efforts to update and improve the festival each year must never accidentally mess up the things that make it unique and special to our community.

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There is an aspect of the Apple Harvest Festival that I have never talked about or written about. Partly, this is because no one would be in a position to observe it, except those of us who (as staff members) are involved in the days of set-up before the festival. It's also partly because I've been trying to figure it out, and haven't known exactly what to say about it.

What I'm referring to is very simply this—the large number of people who specifically come to visit the nature center in the days just before the Apple Harvest Festival.

Bear in mind that we do no organized programs during these days of preparation, as we get ready for 5000 friends to visit us on festival day. We're not actively teaching anyone during these days of preparation—we're just getting things ready. Sort of like getting your house ready for a big party (only on an unimaginable scale!)—not exactly the time you'd think people would drop by. Nonetheless, lots of people come. They come to smell the apples in the crates, and the apple pies baking. They come to inspect the old cider presses. They come to hang around under the empty tents. They come to eat picnic lunches at the many picnic tables scattered around. They come to check-out the Kids' Area under the pines, walking the roped-off maze and the long aisles between the trees. They come to walk the accessible Adventure Trail, and look at the scarecrows—comparing and evaluating them at length. They come to hike the newly-cut Hayride route. They come to walk among the vacant 12' x 12' posted squares of the Art and Craft Exhibitors' spaces—reading the names on the lath sticks, and figuring out where the carvers, spinners, weavers, and metalsmiths will be found. They come to poke around among the tarped-over piles of tables and chairs, the stashes of craft supplies, the food and beverage containers waiting to be filled. They come to inspect the wooden performance stage on the west hillside, where the musicians will play. These early visitors include solo hikers, couples, families, grandparents with their grand-kids, pre-school classes, scout troops, home-school groups, men and women on their way home from work, and organized day-trips from senior centers. They all seem to have the same look, sort of a look of pre-occupied searching. I have rarely asked any of them whether they

are coming to the Apple Harvest Festival (I assume they mostly are), since they all seem pretty focused on their own particular agenda. I would like to speculate on what that agenda might be.

Retzer Nature Center is a naturalized landscape, in which human amenities have been brought very close to nature's border, allowing people to come to the edge and look across into nature. This is obvious along our trail system—tied together as it is by sign, trail marker, and map, to lead people on a journey of discovery without losing their way. It is especially obvious along the accessible Adventure Trail, where specially supportive amenities allow folks with disabilities to make their way right to the very edge of nature. Across the terrain, restored landscapes are arranged so as to come up right next to the visitor, filling senses (and minds) with a vision of natural diversity. This is so even in the Learning Center building, with the tree-house view and perched Rain Gardens filling perception on every side.

During the week before AppleFest, though, something else happens. The exact, precise placement of the festival into the waiting autumn landscape seems to erase the boundaries where the human world leaves off, and the natural world begins. As AppleFest starts to take its place within its natural setting, the human and natural worlds seem to merge for awhile—making it possible to be both 'of humanity' and 'of nature' at the same time. The woods becomes a place for games. The prairie becomes a place for horse-drawn wagons. The field becomes an arena for artists. The hillside becomes a musical performance. The natural, open air becomes a place for friends and feasting. The apples on the trees become an irresistible smell and taste.

Obviously all this comes to fruition on AppleFest day, when 5000 friends jam the premises. But I think our throng of early visitors, in the days before the festival, have discovered that the magic blending of human and natural realms can be experienced, in its essence, before the multitudes show up. I think some of them are looking back to a world they experienced in childhood, on the farm. I think others are dreaming of a world they might have glimpsed in a painting, a poem, or a story. I think still others are trying to visualize a world they might yet discover again, for their children or grandchildren. I think somehow they recognize this melded natural-and-human landscape—as if they know what it is, as if somehow they've seen it before. Whatever they are searching for, whatever they see, they seem to come back for it every year.

Nearly 20 years at Retzer Nature Center has made me philosophical about the place. I know that there's more here than meets the eye—my eye, or anyone else's. I come to work here each day, and it is a wonderful place to work, and it has its own particular, personal meaning to me. But I also know that the sum total of all the personal meaning that's here, the particular meaning that it has for each of the many thousands of visitors, is vast—and is none of my business. In "Song of the Open Road", the poet Walt Whitman says (speaking of the road, and also of life), "I believe you are latent with unseen existences". I think this is no less true of nature centers.

I feel humbled to be someone whose work is to bring people into meaningful contact with nature. I do this, but the particular meaning that each person might derive from their relationship with nature is unique and personal, and individual to each person.

Nothing reminds me of this so much as seeing our pre-AppleFest visitors.

*Larry*



## The Last Prairie

# “Queen” of the Prairie



Before your mind drifts to the renaissance of Western Europe, we should bring it back here to the midwest. And before you start thinking of that pink-plumed monstrosity from Illinois, we should clarify that we are not talking about *Filipendula rubra* also known as Queen of the Prairie. All right, perhaps that was a little harsh for a good plant but it is kind of monstrous in a way; it can reach seven feet in good growing conditions! Please do keep in mind that while it is native in Illinois, it is “introduced and escaped” here.

Identification is the key before beginning any ecological exercise, including articles. Without further adieu, our Queen is none other than *Daucus carota* or Queen Anne's Lace/Wild Carrot. This member of the carrot family (Apiaceae) is not native to our country. It is from Eurasia (the fantastical country where Europe and Asia are magically combined for scientific purposes) and apparently English royalty used it as “living lace” in the eighteenth century (Czarapata 2005). While it pleased her Majesty back in the seventeen hundreds, it is somewhat of a bother here in the colonies (and westward as the case may be). This plant is listed as an official noxious weed in Iowa, Michigan, Washington and Ohio. Here in Wisconsin it is considered ecologically invasive in some circles and is at least a nuisance in most. Some folks think it is pretty and should be left alone. I must admit, some butterflies seem to agree. Its preference is open fields with rich soils and it does better with disturbance, edges and open soil.

Here at Retzer Nature Center Queen Anne's Lace is doing quite well, thank you very much. The obvious question is what do we do about it as land managers? There are many sources for recommended remedies, which range from hand work to chemicals. From our experience, cutting at the peak of flowering time (usually sometime in July) can reduce your seed production but not eliminate it. You can certainly herbicide it with Round Up or a broad-leaf specific product with success. One of the

best methods is to gather up a bunch of hardy souls and pull it after a rain. It is a biennial plant with a main taproot that unsurprisingly smells of carrots. If you get that root out of the ground, you kill it.

One of the best things about Wild Carrot is that it tends to decline as native plants increase. Even organizations that call it ecologically invasive agree with this very helpful concept. This means if you have natives you can manage for those natives and manage against your Lace at the same time. If you don't have enough, you can plant more. You could start over and plant a prairie from scratch. As long as you mow in the first two years, the planting will eventually out-compete the weed. This is very good news.

With all this, the question of how to manage it here at Retzer remains. We have been mowing and pulling it for many years but we cannot seem to get a grip. This year, Queen Anne's Lace is having a population party and we took a very close look at all the white attendees. We decided to take a different road this year and simply *not* manage it, which is in fact a management unto itself. This may seem lazy but I will list the reasons for this decision and you can decide for yourself.

- 1. Personnel:** As with most occupations, there is more to do than you have staff to accomplish it. This is not the chief reason but it certainly adds fuel to the fire.
- 2. Conservation:** In addition to the hours people spend mowing this vile weed, there is the gasoline and emissions from burning it.
- 3. Disturbance:** The management itself can actually create a condition that Wild Carrot likes. It is a species that thrives on natural community disturbance. The mowing we do to control it is a disruption of sorts. It removes the herbaceous “canopy” or competition and sets everything back like a lawn. This does not really apply to hand pulling but we also do not have the time to hand pull all of our Queen Anne's Lace. We do employ the occasional large volunteer group but even they cannot pull all our Lace.

4. **Native Plants:** Now, this doesn't apply to all of our fields but if there are any native plants, they utterly hate mowing. If you mow during the growing season you will discourage your natives. They simply do not show much vigor when cut and you can even extirpate many of them by mowing. You might argue that Bison did the same thing, cutting off plants as they fueled their big, hairy hides. Remember, a Deere is not a Bison. Bison were selective and even herds of them cut at varying heights instead of a very even cut over a large area. They also preferred grasses to forbs. Finally, they did not have Queen Anne's Lace trying to replace the existing flora so even if they did kick out a few plants, they could recolonize without biennial Eurasian upstarts getting in the way.
5. **Distribution:** While it is true that we have large numbers of Queen Anne's Lace at the nature center, they are not in our native areas. They are doing very well along the edges of the prairies and in the old fields where there are few native species at all. The remnants and even the planted prairies are effectively fighting it off all on their own as long as we treat them to a few HINPs—**Human Induced Natural Processes**—such as fire every once in awhile.
6. **Priority:** There are many middle of the road exotic species. Some of them merit very close observation as they may not have had enough time here to reach a "critical mass". Some of the plants that have only been here for a few decades may not have had enough time to build up their populations and demonstrate just how much damage they can do. Most pros agree Wild Carrot has been around long enough to show us its true nature, which is not as bad as some. As far as invasive plants go, this one is a wilting violet. The key word is invasive; plants that are able to infiltrate intact communities and disrupt balance. For our efforts, we will try focusing all of them on plants everyone agrees are huge problems.

We are not so foolish as to think we can forget about Queen Anne's Lace, which can be truly invasive in very well-drained soils (Eckardt). We will watch our quality areas over the years to see if it gains footholds. Until then, we leave it to the butterflies and bees with our compliments.

*Mike*

**Further Reading:**

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# RETZER NATURE CENTER

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## Digital Migration!

It is our goal, all of us, to live in a way that's more in harmony with our planet. We try to turn off the lights, make our homes more energy efficient, use less fuel, and recycle. We do our best to conserve and restore the lands and waters around us. And we try to teach our kids and grand-kids a better way for the future.

It's in this spirit that Retzer Nature Center is making a change in how we communicate with you!

Our newsletter, Center Line, has come your way these past 27 years(!) in paper form—I have no idea how many trees this translates into, but it is my belief that mostly it has been worth the paper it was printed on. Nonetheless, technology provides us with an opportunity to make a good and tree-friendly change.

As part of Waukesha County's Sustainability Initiative, Retzer Nature Center is moving toward a paper-less, digital format for our publications. And we're starting with our newsletter, Center Line.

Starting with the next issue (Spring 2009), Center Line will come your way in digital form. To continue to receive it, all you need to do is send us an e-mail at [retzer@waukeshacounty.gov](mailto:retzer@waukeshacounty.gov), telling us to send your Newsletter in digital form, using the internet. Please also include your name and address in the e-mail—and we'll do the rest! You'll receive your quarterly Center Line from us, in paper-less form—and you'll have the satisfaction of helping us save some trees!

Thanks!

Larry

(P.S.—For those of you who may not have a computer, please let us know that you still need to receive Center Line through the mail, in printed form.)

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Larry

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