

Behind Wisconsin's wildlife story

A cleaner environment also benefits the humans who watch them

By Eric Hansen

I live in a land where 2,000 bald eagles chose to raise their young last spring.

Free to come and go as they please, they put down in my home state and dot the remote shorelines with nests so large they sometimes reach a weight of 2,000 pounds.

Other parents made similar choices. Some 3,000 loons and 13,000 river otters added their eerie calls and amusing antics, animation richer than any Disney cartoon, to the soundtrack and visuals of this place.

Ten thousand sandhill cranes riding the southerly breezes of spring joined them, their haunting bugle a vivid reminder that they are the oldest living bird on our planet.

I live in Wisconsin, and springtime around here can be a mighty fine thing.

Each day, the morning light reveals a natural world pulsating with renewed activity - and rich story lines play out whether we pause to witness them or not.

Great waves of snow white tundra swans, melodious voices calling, sweep up the Mississippi River Valley and red fox pups play leapfrog near their dens.

The 50,000 sturgeon of Lake Winnebago - their spawning run up the Wolf River is a favorite spectacle of local wildlife watchers - are the largest intact population of these ancient fish on Earth. For a brief week, that fabled river's rocky shorelines become a

prehistoric mosh pit as the giant sturgeon nudge, jostle and thrash on their spawning sites.

Thing is, as I contemplate the ebb and flow of Wisconsin's populations of charismatic wildlife, I've come to believe their stories are a mirror reflection of our own.

Humans may not have created these wildlife stories, but it is our willingness to make relatively minor adjustments in our own behavior that allows these stories to continue and offers wildlife the elbow room to flourish in resurgent numbers.

We left the porch light on and they came home.

Our eagle numbers today are 10 times what they were 40 years ago, a statistic widely credited to the fact that we stopped using DDT, a pesticide that weakened the shells of eagle and loon eggs.

Most biologists believe our resurgent river otter population is a direct result of clean water campaigns.

There is a pattern here and the bottom line is clear: What is good for them - clean water, conservation of habitat and a precautionary approach to using chemicals - is also good for us.

One explanation for the strength of Wisconsin's conservation ethic is the presence of famous figures such as Aldo Leopold, a

tireless advocate for renewal and healing of the land we inherited.

Leopold and other well-known leaders such as Gaylord Nelson certainly made major contributions but I believe there is something else at work here - something deeper, broader and more persuasive than the efforts and insights of a few.

That something is a widespread hunger for what is genuine and lasting.

I see extensive evidence that people find bedrock strength when they touch the land here. Some magnetic force, some healing power draws them back time and again.

Wisconsin's organic farmers, new patriots of tried and true family farm values, are a notable part of the local food web in the Upper Midwest.

The Menominee Nation's forest stewardship is a widely studied model of wisdom and foresight.

Fishermen tie the flimsiest of leaders on their lines and wade through alder thickets searching for the smallish native brook trout rather than patronize a fish store.

Birders rise at 4 a.m. for a dawn patrol, eager to catch the best of the morning show.

Camouflaged turkey hunters opt to sit in a Buddha-like state for hours, bow in hand. I have to believe those hunters would choose another method if some connection to the spirit of the land, and those that were here before us, wasn't part of the quest.

There is a lot in Wisconsin that makes me smile. Serene forests and wave-washed shores. Organic farmers and bow hunters. Eagles nesting and sandhill cranes bugling.

Bird watchers, trout fishermen and Menominee foresters. Loons yodeling and river otters cavorting.

Most of all, I value one key aspect of the Wisconsin story, what I can only call the remarkable migration of the human heart in these parts: Our willingness to learn, adapt and adjust.

That consciousness, that passion for what is timeless and authentic, has been a vital and empowering force.

It receives the gifts that the creatures and the land offer us and returns them in a circle of life. As we nurture that cycle, we sustain an important part of the quality of life Wisconsinites value so highly.

That is my Wisconsin, the land where I live.

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