



CHICAGO AUDUBON SOCIETY
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Periodicals

COMPASS

Navigating the world of birds and nature

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Protecting Lake Calumet Wetlands All Over Again Update on the Proposed Outdoor Firing Range

By Carolyn A. Marsh
Conservation Chair
Chicago Audubon Society

Efforts are continuing by conservationists to protect the Lake Calumet wetland complex in southeast Chicago. For months, wildlife advocates have focused their opposition to an outdoor firing range on the owner of the land, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD).

The MWRD land that is under contention is 33 acres of 140 open-space acreage located at O'Brien Lock & Dam on the Calumet River. The neighboring properties are the Hegewisch Marsh, O'Brien Lock Marsh, and Whitford Pond. The Chicago Police Department proposed to the City of Chicago that the Police Department lease the 33 acres for 39 years for a shooting range, arsenal, and police training center.

Conservationists attended three consecutive MWRD board meetings and gave two key objections to the location of the firing range. The first objection was that no wildlife study had yet been conducted on the 140-acre property which has a history of state-endangered Black-crowned Night Herons nesting at that location. In addition, in 2010, Great Blue Heron and Great Egrets were discovered nesting in Whitford Pond trees.



White Egret

Photo by J.R. Compton

The second objection was that for two and a half years the Chicago Police Department had searched for available property only within the Chicago city limits while more suitable land is available for the project outside the city proper. The project is financed by the State Asset Forfeiture Fund which indicates that the firing range can most likely be located outside Chicago. Chicago police training is currently conducted at various locations outside the city. At the meetings, Lt. Raymond Hamilton stated that the facility would be made available to federal, state, suburban, and Chicago police units.



Black-crowned Night Heron

Photo by Cleve Nash



Black-crowned Night Heron

Photo by Graham Owen

While seven MWRD commissioners voted to enter into lease negotiations with the city for the shooting range, two commissioners courageously voted against it. Commissioner Debra Shore stated the process was not satisfactory. She thought the noise would diminish the outdoor experience for families walking the nature trails at the Ford Environmental Center which will be built at Hegewisch Marsh. Commissioner Frank Avila voted against the project because he believed a wildlife survey was necessary to determine if any State of Illinois endangered species are nesting on the property.

It became very clear to wildlife advocates that the Chicago Department of Environment (DOE) was retracting on its previous commitment to provide for a Calumet Open Space Reserve Plan. The city had originally claimed that the Plan is a blueprint for habitat restoration, recreation, and trail connections covering 4,800 acres of one of the largest and most diverse natural wetland complexes in the Midwest.

The DOE presently manages the 140-acre Hegewisch Marsh trails and is responsible for the future Ford Environmental Center. However, now the DOE has taken the dreadful position of supporting the firing range. They minimized the inevitable lead and noise pollution that the project would have on the environment.

Chicago officials also devalued the wetlands by stating that Black-crowned Night Herons are widespread in the country. Their untenable attitude contends that it doesn't matter if wetland bird species have to relocate due to human induced disturbances.

Tens of millions of federal, state and local tax dollars have been spent on studies of Lake Calumet wildlife habitats. The local community had been promised revitalization of the local economy and the natural environment. The costly revitalization plans offered ecotourism as a viable course of economic recovery, but now all those promises sound like humbug.

The Chicago Audubon Society is collaborating with the Southeast Environmental Task Force, Calumet Ecological Park Association, Friends of the Parks, and the Bird Conservation Network to persuade officials to locate the firing range on available land that will not disturb, disrupt, and diminish natural wildlife resources.



White Egret

Photo courtesy naturalwanders.com

In the Forests of the Night

Conclusion

By William H. Funk

Possessed of uncanny sight and hearing, enormously powerful and relentless, insatiable and utterly without fear, the great horned owl exerts dominion over all other creatures of the American night. While rabbits are generally preferred, prey species run the taxonomic scale: crayfish, snakes, shrews, hares, squirrels, sandpipers, bats, rats, mice, fish, hawks, owls, pigeons, possums, herons, groundhogs, weasels, woodpeckers, geese, crows, porcupines, skunks, housecats—in short, anything the owl can physically overcome. Like accipiters (forest hawks such as the Cooper's and sharp-shinned), great horned owls hunt by perching on limbs and waiting in silence for their extraordinary senses to betray the presence of prey on the ground. Once detected by a healthy adult, the victim stands little chance of escape.



From mice to groundhogs, the great horned owl's largely mammalian prey is seized near the base of the skull by zygodactylic feet (like a woodpecker's: two toes in front, two opposing toes in back). The toes are fully feathered to keep the owl's principal weaponry warm and available in all weather conditions, and are capable of exerting an incredible 500 pounds of pressure per square inch, which is easily enough force to break a man's arm if the owl's grip could encircle it. This tremendous pressure is leveraged to drive the four curved talons deep into the prey's vital organs. If the victim continues to struggle the owl will withdraw and reapply its talons in another location, searching for the sweet spot of heart or lungs. Death results from organ failure, blood loss or severe internal injuries occasioned by the owl's crushing grip. For large prey such as skunks and housecats, the owl will bring its powerful black beak into play, immobilizing the quarry as best it can while digging through the neck muscles to the spinal cord. During these battles, which can last for a half hour or more, the owl becomes possessed of a maniacal rage, with human observers able to stand unheeded a few feet away from the combatants.

Like many raptors (Latin for "one who seizes by force"), horned owls employ what is best described as *fury* when subduing large prey, maximizing the damage they inflict so as to ensure a quick kill and little or no dangerous resistance. The great horned owl is, after all, only a bird, and birds are delicate, hollow-boned creatures, half air themselves, and cannot withstand the concussive blows that solid-boned mammals may shrug off. The legendary ornithologist Arthur Cleveland Bent, in his *Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey* (1937), recorded the horned owl's killing rage:

"A few feet in front of me was a large Horned Owl in a sort of sitting posture. His back and head were against an old log. His feet were thrust forward, and firmly grasped a full-grown skunk. One foot had hold of the skunk's head and the other clutched it tightly by the middle of the back. The animal seemed to be nearly dead, but still had strength enough to leap occasionally into the air in its endeavors to shake off its captor. During the struggle, the Owl's eyes would fairly blaze, and he would snap his beak with a noise like the clapping of your hands."

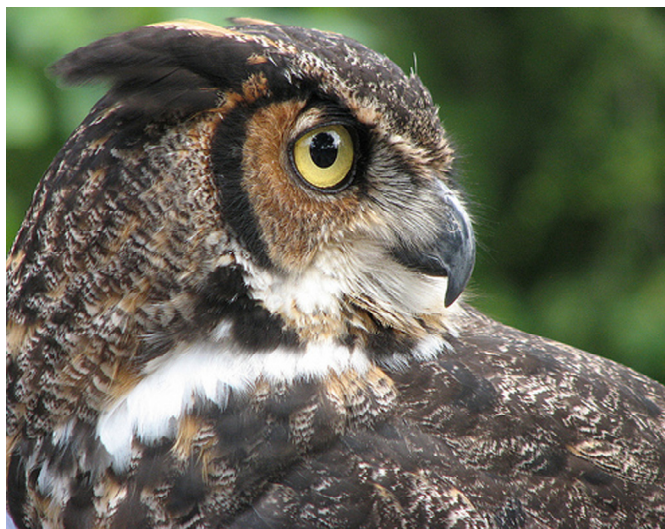
Yet this killing machine, ferocious without peer, is also a devoted parent; in fact much of the hunting by a mated pair is done for that most elemental and noble of motives—perpetuation of the species. Horned owls are savagely protective of their offspring, and the murderous strength unsheathed in combat is easily turned on interlopers who dare to approach an occupied nest. Bent recollects one incautious egg collector's description of a typical two-pronged attack:

"Swiftly the old bird came straight as an arrow from behind and drove her sharp claws into my side, causing a deep dull pain and unnerving me, and no sooner had she done this than the other attacked from the front and sank his talons deep in my right arm causing blood to flow freely, and a third attack and my shirtsleeve was torn to shreds for they had struck me a third terrible blow on my right arm tearing three long, deep gashes, four inches long; also one claw went through the sinew of my arm, which about paralyzed the whole arm."

The horned owl's drive to satisfy the hunger of its young is such that it kills more, sometimes much more, than even gluttonous

owlets can eat. The young are fierce competitors for meat and will sometimes kill one another when food is insufficient. However, the parents' hunting prowess is such that in most years this is rarely a concern. According to Bent, one nest contained "a mouse, a young muskrat, two eels, four bullheads [catfish of the genus *Ameiurus*], a woodcock, four ruffed grouse, one rabbit, and eleven rats. The food taken out of the nest weighed almost eighteen pounds."

Great horned owls mate for life but live separately for about a quarter of each year. After spending the fall and early winter hunting apart from one another a mated pair is eager to renew their bond, with hooting courtship serenades beginning in the frigid depths of January, earlier than any other North American avian species. The courtship ritual is purposefully seductive and even touching: after gentle hooting has lured her within range, the male softly approaches the larger female, strokes her with his bill, lowers his wings and makes a series of solemn bows to her before renewing his tender caresses. Eventually the pair fly off together to mate and find a home to rear their young, usually an abandoned nest of a hawk, crow, heron or squirrel situated 30-70 feet above the ground. If they are unable to find a suitable empty nest before the female is ready to lay eggs, the mated pair will simply appropriate an occupied one, driving away or killing the residents. Attacked during the night when they are at their most vulnerable, even red-tailed hawks are unable to withstand the great horned owl.



Great Horned Owl

Photo by Susan Watts

Between one and five white and nearly spherical eggs are laid before the snow melts, with the male providing his spouse abundant prey while she broods the young. The owlets, hatched over time and thus of differing ages and sizes, are incubated by both parents for 25-30 days. The young begin flying about two and half months after hatching. The fledgling owlets, having leapt from their reeking nest in the first of many future displays of raw nerve, spend ten days to two weeks on the ground while their flight muscles gain sufficient strength for liftoff. During this time their devotedly protective parents feed and guard them with fearsome belligerence.

By the time they are ten weeks old the young owls are ready to fly, often hunting together as they learn, by trial and error, how to do what horned owls do best. During this weaning period they are fed supplemental rations by their parents. By October the young are on their own because the adults expel them from their territory. The parents then separate from each other and take up solitary existences until the winter courtship comes around once more.

As a great horned owl ages it necessarily becomes a more proficient hunter. Those who fail to learn or are crippled in battle during the educational phase simply disappear.

Part I of this article was published in the November/December issue.

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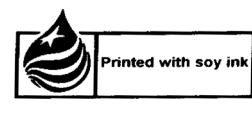
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Announcing the 2011 Chicago Audubon Biennial Environmental Awards Banquet

The Chicago Audubon Society will hold its biennial Environmental Awards Banquet this coming spring. These awards honor those who have made contributions to conservation and birding in the Chicagoland area. We are asking our members and others involved in and/or interested in conservation to submit nominations for the 2011 awards. The date and place of the ceremony and dinner will be announced in the next issue and on our website. In the meantime, if you have any suggestions for nominees in any of the categories listed in the nomination form, you may send your nominations by email to casresearch@comcast.net or fill out the form included in this issue. If you send a nomination by email, be sure to state the name, organization, and category for your choices and follow the criteria described in the form below. You may also use the form on our website located at: www.chicagoaudubon.org.

Awards will be presented only to those who have been officially nominated and voted on. The Chicago Audubon Board of Directors chooses the final Award recipients. To submit your nomination by email, please send to: casresearch@comcast.net. To submit your nomination by regular mail, fill out the form and mail to:

Alan Anderson
1633 Howard Avenue
Des Plaines, Illinois 60018

Chicago Audubon Environmental Awards Nomination Form

The Award categories are listed below. Awards will be presented only to those who have been officially nominated and voted on. The Chicago Audubon Board of Directors chooses the final Award recipients. To nominate your candidate, please fill out the form and mail to:

Alan Anderson
1633 Howard Avenue
Des Plaines, Illinois 60018

You may also submit your nominees by email to: casresearch@comcast.net. If you send an email nomination, please list the name, organization, and category for your choice(s), and follow the criteria below.

The Environmental Awards categories are:

Excellence in Environmental Reporting
Protector of the Environment—Educator
Protector of the Environment—Political Service
Protector of the Environment—Single Act (individual)
Protector of the Environment—Single Act (group)
Protector of the Environment—Avocation
Protector of the Environment—Vocation
Service to Chicago Area Birders

Your Name: _____
Your Address: _____
Your Email Address: _____
Award Category: _____
Name of Candidate: _____
Candidate's Title (if applicable): _____
Candidate's Address: _____
Candidate's Phone and/or email: _____

Separately, please explain why you think this candidate is worthy of the particular award. Please cite specific examples of his or her work in the past two years that relate to the award category. Include names and phone numbers or email addresses of other people that can attest to this candidate's qualifications for receiving an award. Thank you very much for your participation!

Birding A Poem

*Do you remember the first bird,
the way it scuttled across the lawn, stopped stiff,
tilted its head, and listened to the earth?
Don't you still need to hold still sometimes
and feel the world underfoot?
Aren't you plucked from this life
by such singing as unthreads each day,
struck by shadows soaring past your feet
and scaling the buildings that tower in the way?
Isn't a black silhouette perched in every tree?
Who among us doesn't sit up with owls
interrogating the night
or stalk cornfields with crows?
Who hasn't been knocking on dead wood for years,
flapping through life, season by season,
squawking and warbling, warbling and squawking,
migrating, migrating, migrating?
Don't we all rise in the fall
and flock to the mountaintops
to recognize those passing?
Aren't our tongues winged
and feathered with their names?
Isn't that what we call praying?*

~ John Smith ~



Great Horned Owl

Photo by N. Razp

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Bright lights from buildings, along with reflective or transparent glass in windows and lobbies, are hazards for birds migrating through Chicago.

Last fall more than 1000 collision-injured birds were rescued – all from a relatively small area downtown. With your assistance, more birds can be saved.

YOU CAN HELP BY:

- Joining **morning rescue teams**
- Monitoring buildings** where you live or work
- Transporting birds** to wildlife rehabilitation centers
- Supporting **collision prevention work**
- Assisting in **public outreach** and awareness programs



Visit www.birdmonitors.net or
call 773-988-1867

Calendar of Events

Workdays
Members Programs
Birdwalks

Skokie Lagoons Workdays.
10:00 a.m. every second Saturday. These workdays are continuous throughout the year. The Chicago Audubon Society sponsors regular monthly workdays at Skokie Lagoons every second Saturday of the month. Activities include buck-thorn cutting, brush pile burning, and other management activities. Wear work clothes. Meet at the Tower Road parking lot, east of the lagoon bridge. For further information, please call Dave Kosnik at (847) 456-6368. Everyone is welcome!

Montrose Point Magic Hedge Stewardship Workdays. Future dates will be announced in early spring. Volunteers will be needed to help with weeding, mulching, planting native shrubs and trees. We are also establishing a prairie! Wear work clothes. For information about work dates, to sign up, and for directions, please contact David Painter: (773) 383-0721 or email at dvdpaint@yahoo.com. Everyone is welcome!

Wooded Island Birdwalks.
Jackson Park. Every Wednesday at 7:00 a.m. and every Saturday at 8:00 a.m. Walks are continuous throughout the year. These wonderful walks continue throughout the year up to New Year's Day. Bring binoculars, field guides, and dress for the weather. Many species are seen. Meet at Clarence Darrow Bridge, just south of Museum of Science and Industry. For details and directions, contact Pat Durkin at pat.durkin@comcast.net. Everyone is welcome!

Owl Prowls at North Park Village Nature Center. 5801 North Pulaski, Building D:
Friday, January 21: Family Owl Prowl from 6:30 to 8:00 pm.
Friday, January 28: Teens Owl Prowl from 6:30 to 8:00 pm.
Friday, February 4: Adults Owl Prowl from 7:00 to 9:00 pm.



White Egret

Photo by Carol Foil

For further information, contact Owl Prowl leader Edward Warden at ewarden@yahoo.com.

The 2011 Annual Gull Frolic. Saturday, February 19. 8:00 a.m. to early p.m.

This is an all-day birding outing hosted by the Illinois Ornithological Society (IOS) at Winthrop Harbor Yacht Club in Winthrop Harbor, Illinois. The Frolic will include a program by Alvaro Jaramillo who most recently co-edited a Spanish translation of *A Neotropical Companion* and whose guidebook *Birds of Chile* is now the standard

field guide for that country. His book *New World Blackbirds: The Icterids* covers the biology and identification of this fascinating group of birds. There will also be information booths of sponsoring organizations and refreshments. "Gull Experts" will assist attendees with identification of the 6 to 8 species of winter gulls that are normally present in the harbor. Registration is \$10. For complete information and a link to the registration form, go to: www.lakecookaudubon.org/Gull_Frolic_Illinois.php. If you have questions, contact Brian Herriott at 847-329-9005 or email wrybill@sbcglobal.net. Everyone is welcome!



Owlets

Photo by Jess Thompson

January/February 2011

Wild Things. A Chicago Wilderness Conference for People and Nature. Saturday, March 5, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. University of Illinois at Chicago.

Wild Things will feature the region's best conservationists in a variety of large and small group sessions drawn from real-life experiences with everything from the nitty gritty of habitat management, botany, zoology, environmental advocacy, education, art, culture, history, backyard and neighborhood ecology. This will be a great day for anyone who loves nature, conservation, gardening, restoration or anyone who cares about the environment. The keynote speaker will be Curt Meine, conservation biologist and Aldo Leopold biographer. He will be presenting *The Legacy of Aldo Leopold in the Chicago Region*, including a preview of a new Leopold film. Early registration will begin December 8, 2010 and end January 30, 2011. The cost during that time period is \$28; registration after January 30 is \$40. Registration, directions, and conference information can be found on the Habitat Project website at www.habitatproject.org. If you have any questions, contact chicagowildthings@yahoo.com or phone 847-328-3910, extension 21. Don't miss this exciting day!

Reminder to our readers:

To see all our newsletters in living color, go to our website: www.chicagoaudubon.org and click on the word "Compass" in the top row of links.