



A Citizens' watershed conservation organization

# Reading the River

Volume 12, Issue 4~ Fall 2015

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## What's happening here?



Pat LaBarbera and his red tail hawk Nola seem to be planning strategy when the falconer brought the bird of prey to the Black River Falls Middle School this past fall. For more about the falconry program at the middle school, see page 3.

## Greetings from the President

So far, it's been a very mild start to our winter. I'm looking forward to snow, so we can participate in winter activities such as skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling or other winter activities.

The snow also brightens the landscape and covers up the

drab scenery of this time of the year.

We are very fortunate to be able to select from a variety of cold-weather clothing for outdoor activities we take part in during the winter.

*Greetings, continued on page 2*

## *Vision*

The Friends of the Black River is a citizen-led organization that is a well-informed, respected, active contributor to projects and decision-making enhancing the river and its watershed.

## *Mission*

The Friends of the Black River will foster community appreciation, understanding, and sustainable use of the river and its watershed by hosting educational and enjoyable programs, events and conservation projects and by promoting wise decision-making when issues affect the health of the Black River Basin.

## Upcoming events for 2016

**January 13**—Monthly meeting, program about little known species of the Driftless Region

**February 10**—Monthly meeting, program about Arctic water fowl

**February 13**—Snowshoe hike

**March 9**—Monthly meeting, topic to be announced

**April 2**—Morrison Creek paddle, 10 a.m.

**April 3**—Robinson Creek paddle, 10 a.m.

**April 10**—Black River whitewater paddle, 10 a.m.

**April 13**—Monthly meeting, program about bears

**April 23**—Earth Day cleanup

**May 7**—Spring wildflower walk, 10 a.m.

**May 11**—Monthly meeting, topic to be announced

**May 22**—Black River flatwater paddle 12:30 p.m.

**June 8**—Monthly meeting, topic to be announced

**June 18**—Whitewater paddle, Hatfield dam release

**July 4**—Paddle in the Park, paddling for the public at Lunda Community Park

**August 27**—Annual river cleanup

**September 14**—Monthly meeting, topic to be announced

**October 12**—Monthly meeting, photography of migrating birds

**November 9**—Monthly meeting, topic to be announced

**December 5**—Annual holiday party  
(Dates and programs subject to change)

Unless otherwise noted, regular monthly meetings will be held at 6:30 p.m. in the lower level community room of the Jackson County Bank.

## Topics of upcoming monthly meeting presentations

**January**—Armund Bartz, endangered resources ecologist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources will talk about species living in the Driftless Region that are not well known.

**February**—Sadie Ulman will present a program about Arctic waterfowl

**March**—Still to be determined

**April**—Wildlife biologist Scott Roepke will to give a presentation about bears

**October**—Alan Stankevitz, program on bird photography and bird identification during migration



A snowy owl in flight captured by Alan Stankevitz's camera.

## Greetings from the president, *continued from page 1*

Hopefully you will review our schedule of events and join us at our meetings or other events. Keep in mind that we promote our activities in the local papers, on WWIS radio and through email as well as on the website and Facebook page.

Note that our February meeting will feature Sadie Gearing Ulman, daughter of FBR members Tom and Denise Gearing, who is

doing wildlife research in Alaska. It should be a very interesting program.

I want to thank our board members for their time and efforts in helping to make this organization function so well.

Also thanks to all our members who participate in our activities and work to help us all gain a better understanding of the natural world that we live in.

~ Steve Rake



## FBR sponsors falconry program at middle school

An ancient hunting sport that uses birds of prey as hunting partners is being kept alive by local falconers Pat and Kelly LaBarbera. The LaBarberas shared their knowledge and experiences in falconry with Black River Falls Middle School sixth-graders and with the public Nov. 19 at the middle school.

The LaBarberas have been practicing the ancient sport of falconry since 2009.

"Falconry is the art of using trained raptors to hunt," said LaBarbera, retired Black River Falls chief of police and part-time Jackson County Sheriff's deputy. "It was still being practiced in Europe when Americans went there during World War I. Servicemen brought that it (falconry) back with them."

Falconers need to be licensed and the path to become licensed includes an apprenticeship. LaBarbera apprenticed with Pat Hoge until he passed the test to obtain his license.

Currently the LaBarberas have two hunting birds, a red tail hawk named Nola and a Cooper's hawk named Sassy. They also have a blind barred owl named Hootie they use to educate people about owls.

"All the birds are indigenous to the state and are taken from the wild," said Pat. "We don't own these birds. We can only take juvenile birds. It's against the law to capture an adult bird."

To catch a bird of prey, falconers use a wire cage about the size of a loaf of bread with the outside of the cage covered with loops of monofilament. A mouse or similar prey animal is placed inside. When the raptor drops on the trap attempting to catch the mouse, it becomes caught in the loops. The falconer can then ap-



Kelly LaBarbera with Nola, the red tail hawk.  
Photo by Pat McKnight



Pat LaBarbera with Hootie, the barred owl.  
Photo by Pat McKnight

proach the bird, being careful to avoid the bird's talons.

"The talons are the most dangerous part of the bird," said LaBarbera. "The talons are razor sharp."

After the bird is captured, the falconer will begin the process to "man" the feathered predator. Manning is the term for training the bird to be handled by humans.

LaBarbera told the students the falconers hunt with their birds by releasing them in the field. The birds fly up to a tree and perch nearby, waiting for the humans to walk through the grass to flush prey.

"The hawks are trained to follow their handlers," said LaBarbera. "They're smart enough to know we are the dogs. They are successful in bringing down prey about once out of every nine attempts."

When the larger birds are successful in bringing down a rabbit or pheasant, the LaBarberas will keep the parts of the animals they don't eat to feed to their birds.

The birds are reluctant to give up any prey they bring down and will "mantle" their kill. Mantling is when the bird spreads its wings to hide its kill from other predators.

To get the kill away from the bird, the falconer will cover the prey and distract the hawk with food as he pulls the dead animal from under the hawk. He will then put the game in a pouch behind his back.

The LaBarberas also talked about the equipment used to manage the birds. To keep the birds quiet when carried on a gloved hand, a specially made hood is placed on the bird. To secure the birds to the handler's hand, they wear leather thongs called jesses.

As the birds age, they become less cooperative and they are then released back to the wild.

## Newly elected FBR Board of Directors

At the 2015 FBR annual meeting held October 14, members in attendance approved a slate of candidates for the FBR board of directors.

The vote returned Jeff Polzin and Sue Bitter to their seats and approved the nomination of Jackson Burgau to the board.

At the board's Nov. 2 meeting, the board voted to keep Steve Rake as president and Mitch Wester as vice president.

Newcomer Jackson Burgau was elected the organization's treasurer, filling the position formerly held by Grady Gutknecht, who decided to retire from the board.

There are several openings for anyone who would like to serve as a member of the board.

Anyone interested in being on the board is encouraged to contact a FBR board member.



The members of the Friends of the Black River Board of Directors are (back row, left to right) Jeff Polzin, Pete Segerson, Sue Bitter, (front row, left to right) Jackson Burgau, Mitch Wester and Steve Rake. Tom Teeples wasn't available for the photo. Photo by Pat McKnight

## FBR holds annual holiday party

FBR held its annual December Holiday Party Monday, Dec. 7. The party was held in the lower level community room of Jackson County Bank.

The party had to be moved to the bank because Falls Theater, where the party had been held in past years, is closed.

Guests were still treated to a movie showing. They enjoyed "EARTH," a DisneyNature epic. The film documented the lives and struggles of some of the most magnificent and courageous creatures on the planet.

The story depicts the journey of three animal families - polar bears, elephants and humpback whales captured in rare and majestic footage.

Following the film, Steve Firkins presented his annual award. Firkins creates a special "trophy" to recognize a member who has been active in the organization's mission.

Steve presented the award, constructed from items found during the annual river cleanup, to Jackson Burgau for his work on stream clearing and for accepting a position on the FBR Board. Jackson was elected treasurer for FBR in November.



Jackson Burgau appeared pleased with the award he was presented by Steve Firkins. Photo by Pat McKnight

## November presenter shares story of struggle to ban DDT

Citizen activists can make a difference. That was the message Bill Berry extended to Friends of the Black River members and their guests at the group's Nov. 2 meeting.

Berry, a journalist with the Capital Times, is the author of "Banning DDT: How Citizen Activists in Wisconsin Led the Way." The book chronicles the campaign undertaken by a group of concerned citizens partnering with members of the scientific and business communities to raise awareness of the danger of the indiscriminate use of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane. The pesticide is more commonly known as DDT.

Berry's book focuses on events leading up to and including the 1968-69 administrative hearings held to determine whether DDT should be banned in Wisconsin.

"Wisconsin was in the forefront (in the battle to ban DDT) because of its conservation tradition," said Berry. "The chemical industry underestimated the citizens' group. They tried to paint the activists as a fringe group."

Among the more determined of the activists were a number of suburban homemakers.

"During the 1960s, women were graduating from college and living in the suburbs," said Berry. "They were some of the most educated people. Those housewives were alerting authorities to bird kills (after DDT sprayings). They were the first ones to 'ring the bell.'"

Campaigns led by women were generally not common until the 1960s. Lorrie Otto of Bayside and a pioneer in the natural landscaping movement was one of earliest leaders in the struggle.

"People started bringing her dead robins and she took a basket full of dead robins to city hall," said Berry. "She was asked by the city official, 'What do you want lady, birds or trees?'"

The city was using DDT in its battle against Dutch elm disease. The chemical was generally ineffective against the beetles, but lethal to songbirds.

When the studies about DDT were made public, the citizen activists pushed for hearings to inform the larger public about the broadband pesticide.

"It was found that DDT walked up the food chain and became more concentrated in the top of the food chain," said Berry. "It didn't break down. The studies showed DDT weakened the shells of birds of prey like peregrine falcons and eagles. When the birds tried sitting on the eggs to incubate them, the shells broke."

The ban DDT movement got a big boost after



FBR board member Jackson Burgau (left) and president Steve Rake (right) discuss the battle to ban DDT with Bill Berry. Berry, author of "Banning DDT: How Citizen Activists in Wisconsin Led the Way" was the speaker at the Nov. 2 meeting. Photo by Pat McKnight

a study showed DDT was in every body of water in the state. Sportsmen's groups and industries connected with hunting and fishing became involved in the struggle to protect wildlife and the environment.

"This story is as much about water as it is about birds," said Berry. "When DDT was found in Wisconsin waters, it was a whole new story. Sportsmen's groups and related businesses became engaged (in the fight) because of the economic impact."

Berry told about Martin Hanson who posted warnings about DDT levels in fish at landings around the state. Those warnings had a negative impact on recreational fishing and the industries connected with the sport.

Other businessmen such as Fred Ott who were concerned about the environment supported the campaign. "He was a citizen who recognized he had a bigger role in life," said Berry.

The ban DDT group received financial support from concerned businessmen and foundations.

The campaign also received support from the Environmental Defense Fund and from concerned scientists such as Joseph Hickey, a respected bird researcher. The campaign shifted the role of scientists who were generally uninterested in taking their research public to one of releasing their findings to the media.

Through their efforts and persistence, the citizen activists were successful in Wisconsin and other states. While Michigan was the first state to ban the use of DDT, Wisconsin soon followed suit.

Nature is resilient; we can fix it when we do wrong," said Berry. "You have to do right for the next generation; that's what conservation is about."

## Elk reintroduction topic of October program

Elk are back in Jackson County, and the Department of Natural Resources is working to get the message out to the public. Scott Roepke, wildlife biologist with the DNR, presented a program at the Friends of the Black River's Oct. 14 meeting to inform the public about the small herd.

Native to the state since prehistoric times, the species was hunted into extinction in the 1800s. A previous effort to re-introduce elk to its ancestral habitat resulted in the last elk being killed in 1948.

"This is the third attempt to re-introduce elk to the state," said Roepke. "In 1990, the state legislature directed studies be done to see if elk, moose and caribou could be re-introduced. The studies showed elk would likely do best."

Results of a 2012 survey showed 85 percent of the public supported the idea. With this support, the DNR began working with grass-roots organizations to explore how to go about achieving the goal of again having elk in the state's wildlife areas.

They began working with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources to bring back to Wisconsin about 150 animals.

"Kentucky was found to be a disease free state," said Roepke. "The state has between 10,000 and 20,000 elk in the state. They got their elk from western states, and they are now returning the favor by sending some of their elk to other states. We have a five-year agreement with Kentucky to transfer the animals. They agreed to release cows, calves and young bulls."

The first elk brought into this state through the recent effort to create a herd was in 1995. The animals were settled in the Clam Lake area in northern Wisconsin. "No negative impacts were found with the elk in Clam Lake," said Roepke.

While the goal was to reintroduce elk to Jackson County at the same time, those plans were put on hold due to the discovery of chronic wasting disease in southern Wisconsin.

In January, Roepke traveled to Kentucky with other members of the team to trap and transport elk from that state. The elk were enticed into the pens with bait and allowed to enter as they wanted. They became trapped in the pens when one of the animals activated a trip wire, closing



Scott Roepke, (left) wildlife biologist with the DNR, fielded questions from FBR members and guests following his presentation about the elk reintroduction project. Pictured with Roepke are (left to right) Deane Chase, Darrin Haag and Pat Oppedard. Photo by Pat McKnight

the door to the pen.

Because the elk roamed at night, the trapping teams mostly worked the night shift. "You're kind of working on the elks' schedule," said Roepke. "We shuttled the elk from the traps to the quarantine site."

At the quarantine site, the elk are kept for 45 days and tested for disease. In March, 28 elk were hauled to Jackson County as the first group in the goal of developing a herd of 390 animals. In Jackson County, the elk were kept in an eight-acre quarantine pen constructed in the Black River State Forest for 75 days.

"We fitted the elk with radio collars that have GPS units, so we can track them," said Roepke. "We had four live calves born during the time, and all are still alive. Any new calves will need to be tagged and collared, and we are looking for volunteers to help with that."

Following the quarantine period, the gates of the quarantine pen were opened and the elk were allowed to wander out at will.

Since the elk are roaming the BRSF and the young elk resemble deer, the DNR is working to educate hunters about ways to distinguish between the two species.

Plans are underway to bring more elk back from Kentucky in 2016.

## Ways to support FBR's mission

You can help support the mission of the Friends of the Black River by remembering FBR in your will or with memorials or honorariums.

Checks can be made out to Friends of the Black River and contributions should be sent to PO Box 475, Black River Falls, WI 54615. Thank you.

## Memberships always welcome

Memberships help Friends of the Black River continue its mission of preserving and caring for the Black River.

Show your support for that mission by renewing your membership.

If you are renewing your membership, you do not need to send in a membership form unless there has been a change in your contact information.

### Please help us stay current

**Please help us keep in touch by letting us know your new e-mail and/or postal addresses when they change. Send your e-mail address changes to info\_fbr@yahoo.com**

Become a member by filling out the membership form below and mailing it with your membership dues to the mailing address listed on the form.

## Support your watershed - Join the Friends of the Black River

### Enroll me as a member

Membership Categories (check one)

- \$1.00 Youth (up to age 18)
- \$15.00 Individual
- \$20.00 Family
- \$30.00 Organization or Business
- \$50.00 Cornerstone Member

I would like to give an additional contribution in the amount of \$\_\_\_\_\_

I would like to give this membership as a gift  
(Card will be sent to recipient)  
Occasion \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of recipient \_\_\_\_\_

I'm interested in serving on a committee:

- Land Preservation and Advocacy
- Fundraising and Membership Recruitment
- Programming
- Cleanups and Special Events
- Landings
- I am Interested in becoming a board member

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Please check here \_\_\_ if you would like to receive a receipt.

Return registration and checks payable to:

**Friends of the Black River**  
PO Box 475  
Black River Falls, WI 54615

Comments/Questions:

