



Wisdom

Life of a Fox Island barred owl: a field journal

By John Gevers

Prologue

I first met my new friend the barred owl while hiking Fox Island County Park on Dec. 9, 2021 - 16 days before Christmas and a few more weeks before the anniversary of legend that records wise ones following a certain winter star.

Sometimes, wise ones appear in animal form.

On that cold late afternoon at Fox Island, I hiked without my camera gear just for sheer invigoration. I didn't expect to see anything of special note. Naturalists know that forests never go quiet, but dark December usually means there's not much for a nature photographer to spy. The snowless trails revealed leaves in shades of brown and brown. The sky was not so much silver, but dull gray. It hid the sun. "Bleak mid-winter" comes to mind.

It was the gloaming hour, and at that point in the solstice cycle in northern Indiana, it occurred between 4 and 5 p.m.

I passed a friendly hiker, a fellow nature photographer, it appeared, although I did not know him, on the eastern side of the park. He wore the role well, complete with camouflage attire, and a long lens sporting a camouflage wrap. After friendly greetings, I inquired, "Have you found anything interesting?"

"Only a barred owl that I was surprised to see," was his reply.

My ears perked up since owls are a favorite of mine, if frustratingly elusive.

Without encouragement, the other nature photographer, who didn't know I was one also, proceeded to give me general "coordinates" about where to look for the wise one who was off-trail and well camouflaged high up in a tree.

I didn't hold out much hope that I would be able to locate the owl, if it was even still present by the time I walked into the scene, but southwest in his general pointed direction I did go, full of anticipation.

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© 2021 John Gevers Photography.
600 mm, f/10, 1/400, ISO 12,800, monopod.

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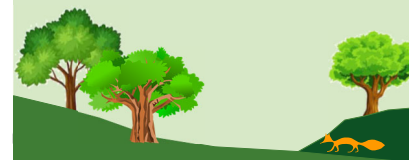
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Meet Ed Powers, 84, Fox Island Alliance board membership chair

How did you get involved with the Fox Island Alliance? (Did you have a role in forming it?)

I didn't have a role in forming FIA, but we joined it shortly afterward. We joined, I guess, because it seemed like a good idea.

Where are you retired from?

A small engineering consulting business located in Fort Wayne.

You and your wife, Cynthia, spend a lot of time counting birds in Vera Dulin Wildlife Observation Building. Can you talk about how you got involved with that, what you do, and changes that you've seen in the numbers or kinds of birds over the years?

We ... live about 15 minutes from Fox Island.

In 1988, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology started Project FeederWatch, asking people to report birds coming to their feeders over the winter. We joined the first year. In 2004, Natalie Haley learned of the project, and asked us to be involved. We started coming to the Vera Dulin Building, then known as the Bird Observation Building, on Monday mornings from November to April. Later, others covered other periods during the two-day count period each week.

I can't say that there has been a lot of changes in the birds that are seen over the years. Now and then we are treated to something special, like the common redpoll that showed up this March.

What countries have you visited on your bird watching exploits?

Most of our birding has been done in the US and Canada - we've been to all 50 states and DC, and the provinces (not the northern territories) of Canada. We visited Cynthia's sister and her husband in Denmark in 1985 and did some birding there while seeing the sights; and they loaned us their car and suggested we go to Sweden for a few days. That is the extent of our international birding.

How long have you been involved in bird watching?

I was interested in birds even as a child, but I didn't know then there was such a thing as bird watching. Cynthia and I were married in 1959, and she learned about birds from her dad, but even so, it took me a while to catch the fever. It wasn't until the '70s that I really began to notice birds on family vacations. We began to go on field trips with the local Stockbridge Audubon Society in 1979. That year, we took a trip to Florida, the first trip where birds were the prime objective.

You do a presentation for Indiana Master Naturalist classes on bird watching. What are the staples needed to going out into the field?

All you really need is a decent binocular and a good field guide. It helps to go with a knowledgeable birder who can help you spot the birds, and point out what distinguishes one bird from another.

Any birds left on your list that you really want to see?

Any bird I haven't seen before would be nice, but I've seen 749 species in the US and Canada, so a new one is not likely. But if I had to pick one in the realm of possibility, it would be a blue-footed booby, a ridiculous goose-sized bird with a very large conical bill and bright blue feet.

Do you have an assortment of bird feeders at home?

We feed black oil sunflower seeds, a seed mix, a blend for goldfinches, and suet. We also have a birdbath, heated in winter.

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Whooping crane shootings: Indiana's shame

By Cynthia Powers

Big flocks of sandhill cranes have been flying north over us, giving their haunting calls while soaring on thermal air currents. Sometimes a whooping crane will be in the flock. These are members of the "Eastern Migratory Population," which were reintroduced beginning in the 1990s. The idea was to create a different population from the original group that wintered along the Texas coast. Whoopers were listed in 1967 as a federally endangered species, and much effort and money has been spent to save them.



A whooping crane is seen in a flock of sandhill cranes.

Since 1967, there have been 34 shooting episodes, resulting in 47 dead cranes. And Indiana has been the scene of five of these! Only Louisiana (12) and Texas (8) have exceeded that number.

The International Crane Foundation, based in Baraboo, Wisconsin, has studied these cases, and reports that 74% of the incidents were NOT related to hunting. "In the few cases that involved hunters, the hunters were already in violation of a hunting regulation, such as shooting before legal hours, when poor lighting makes identification difficult." In other words, they were poachers, not responsible hunters.

All identified perpetrators were white men with an average age of 26.3. Some had prior convictions such as DUI or vandalism. In many cases, alcohol was involved.

The International Crane Foundation has reacted by sending educators to Alabama, Texas, Indiana, and Louisiana to conduct awareness campaigns. They want communities to "Give a Whoop" about their rare visitors. The basic rule would seem to be "DON'T SHOOT BIG WHITE THINGS!" Not whooping cranes, not pelicans, not egrets, and not the very rare leucistic sandhill.

If you want to see a whooper, the best bet is to go to Goose Pond in southwest Indiana, where several may be seen in flocks of sandhills. Sometimes they can be seen at Jasper-Pulaski FWA in western Indiana. Observe from a distance, so as not to stress them.

(information from the International Crane Foundation)

Meet Ed Powers (cont.)

Any more visits to other countries for bird watching planned?

No, nothing planned.

What is/are your favorite bird(s)?

When asked this question, I usually say, "The next one." I do have a fondness for swallows.

How long have you been on the Fox Island Alliance board?

Since the glacier retreated, I think. Or at least since the 1990s.

Are you involved in other nature groups?

I am field trip chair and membership chair for Stockbridge Audubon Society. I've volunteered for ACRES Land Trust, though not much lately.

Did you go through the IMN classes? If so, when?

After helping teach the bird class for several years, I finally took the classes in 2020, and now I know everything about everything.

Possessive common names

Story and photos by Clara Conroy

Taking a spring hike with a naturalist might often sound like people have left their things strewn about the forest. “Oh look, there’s Jacob’s ladder. And here are some Dutchman’s breeches.”

No, this isn’t trash left behind by park visitors, but rather the common names of some native wildflowers. As you explore Fox Island this season, see how many of these unusually named plants you can find.

Bishop’s cap (*Mitella diphylla*)

The smallest blooms in this list are the snowflake-like ones of bishop's cap. It is identifiable by a single pair of leaves half-way up a slender stalk with tiny, widely spaced, fringed flowers near the top. The name bishop's cap refers to the seed capsules, which are split open to resemble the deep cleft in a bishop's miter. These seeds are distributed by splash-cup dispersal, where rain striking the capsule causes it to bend and fling some of its seeds. Look for bishop's cap, also known as miterwort, growing in medium soils and partial sun.



Dutchman’s breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*)

A common spring showstopper at the park, it is hard to miss this plant with fern-like leaves below a nodding stalk bearing double-spurred, white flowers. The nectar primarily attracts long-tongued bees, including honeybees, bumblebees and mason bees, but the flower structure indicates that it is best pollinated by bumblebees. Dutchman’s breeches gets its name due to its resemblance to pantaloons hanging out on a line to dry.

Jacob’s ladder (*Polemonium reptans*)

Jacob’s ladder is typically found in rich, moist woods, often along streambanks. In April or May, a proliferation of small, lavender-blue, bell-shaped flowers appear for several weeks. A wide variety of native bees, honeybees, butterflies, skippers and moths sip nectar from the blossoms. The delicate leaves are pinnately compound, resembling a ladder. This plant’s name has ties to ancient historical figures - the common name refers to a ladder seen in a dream by the biblical Jacob and the scientific name is for King Polemon of Pontus, who reigned from 36 BC to 8 AD.



Solomon’s seal (*Polygonatum*)

Solomon’s seal is the common name for a number of species in the genus *Polygonatum*, with native species being smooth (*P. biflorum*) and hairy (*P. pubescens*). The alternate leaves of Solomon’s seal are carried on long, upright to arching unbranched stalks. The greenish-cream to white, small, bell-shaped flowers dangle beneath the stems at each leaf node and are often hidden by the foliage. The flowers are followed in summer by blue-black fruits resembling small grapes that are often eaten by birds. Another biblical reference, the plant’s rhizome is said to possess scars that resemble the ancient Hebrew seal of King Solomon.

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Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*)

This last spring wildflower is perhaps the most unusual. The blossom of this woodland perennial occurs on a stalk the same height as the glossy leaves, which are divided into three leaflets on stems up to 2 feet tall. When mature, the large, cylindrical, hooded flower is green with brown stripes. This intriguing bloom has a modified leaf or spathe (the pulpit) that wraps around and covers a spadix (Jack) covered with tiny green to purple flowers. A cluster of bright red berries appear in late summer, which may be eaten by birds and mammals. This species is found in rich, moist, deciduous woods and shady floodplains. Good for Jack! He doesn't abandon his pulpit in the woods!



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Miraculously, I located the lazing, contented owl and observed it from a distance for some time. Other than occasional Lazy Susan head rotations, the sleepy owl remained still, uncaring that it was being observed — at an appropriate distance — by a human. I made several pixelated iPhone images from our first meeting, which proved unusable.

Upon a subsequent hike a few days later, I was happily surprised to spy the same barred owl in the same, spectacularly aged tree. I swear it squinted “hoot-lo” to me. Again, I stayed my distance, but communed with it and, I admit, talked dulcet tones to the quiet creature.

I knew I needed to go back with my camera gear, including 600 mm lens, to make an image of this splendid creature while it was still “home” in that tree. So, finally as end-of-day light and winter weather permitted, I appeared Dec. 26, 2021, at 5:43 p.m. at the tree, hauling my gear in to Fox Island, hoping to make a glamour image of the usually elusive barred owl.

Over the following weeks, I made four more visits and always found the owl at home in the same tree in the same perch. I grew excited about the prospect that it may well raise young in this tree. I decided the owl needed a non-gender specific name because I didn't know whether it was male or female. “Wisdom” came to mind and stuck.

And then it snowed heavily three weeks in a row, raising the snow totals well above the needed 4 inches to make the trail accessible only to cross-country skiers. I still walked the winter hiking trails at Fox Island, and always threw positive intentions in the direction of Wisdom, hoping it was doing okay in the depth of winter.

The snow finally melted below the 4-inch mark sometime in February, allowing a hike back to Wisdom's home. My heart sunk when it wasn't there. I waited stock still for half an hour, hoping it would return.

Subsequent hikes to Wisdom's tree at various times of the day, including the gloaming hour, never found the owl in its earlier perch. It looked like we were out of luck to continue a field journal that would record Wisdom's movements and life, including, with good fecund fortune, the rearing of young barred owls.

March 13, 2022

I didn't completely give up hope and walked the trail nearest Wisdom's past home again on March 13, 2022, at 4:25 p.m. Now it was this human's head that made the swift, smooth owl-head swivel when a glance towards the grand old tree pulled into view . . .
. . . Wisdom!

It was back and seemed to be as contented as before in early winter. It hadn't forgotten this perch. Once again, I was back to communing with an owl — from a respectable distance. I talked gently to Wisdom and promised it a baby shower should it decide to raise its 2022 young in this location.

I plan to continue this field journal as the weeks and months roll along with the hope of creating a lasting record of barred owl life in Fox Island County Park.

Upcoming Programs

Note: Most events meet at Fox Island Nature Center. To register or for more information, contact Natalie Haley at foxisland@allencountyparks.org or 260-449-3180. **If you send a check ahead of time, please specify in the memo line which class(es) you are paying for.**

Crop or Craft Night at Fox Island

April 15, May 13 (Fridays)

5-11 p.m.

Cost \$10 per person

Preregister by 4/11 and 5/9 respectively

Class minimum 5, maximum 22

Scrapbook or craft while socializing with other adults. Some refreshments and snacks provided. Optional to chip in on ordering pizza or if you want to bring a snack to share.

Stockbridge Audubon Birding Field Trip

April 16, May 14 (Saturdays)

8 a.m.—noon

Cost \$2 park entry fee, free to pass holder

Preregister not needed

Class minimum 1, maximum 24 in building at one time, no max for outdoor hikes

Join Stockbridge Audubon birding field trip leaders, Eric Helfrich and Lorenzo Kleine in catching the spring bird migration at Fox Island County Park. **Meet** outside Vera Dulin Wildlife Observation Building. Three-four miles of easy hiking trails.

A Study of the Woodcock & April's Full Moon

April 16 & 17 (Saturday & Sunday)

6-9 p.m.

Cost \$2

Preregister by 04/12

Class minimum 1, maximum 24 in building

Join a park naturalist and saunter into Fox Island's oak tree field to find and observe woodcock birds by moonlight.

Forest Preschool

April 20, May 18 (Wednesdays)

1-2:30 p.m.

Cost \$3 per child, \$2 per adult (includes park entry fee)

Preregister by 4/16 and 5/14 respectively

Class minimum 5, maximum 25

(continued...)

Forest Preschool (cont.)

This program is developed for preschool and home school families and teachers. Program is geared for preschool-aged children. All ages are welcome. Meet a naturalist at the Fox Island Nature Center. Preschool teachers are free, April: "amphibian kindergarten," May: "Wildflowers."

Cultural History of Fox Island

April 23 (Saturday)

9 a.m.-noon

Cost \$2 per person

Preregister by 4/12

Class minimum 1, maximum 24

Fox Island is in the process of developing a timeline exhibit to illustrate Fox Island's story. This program discusses that cultural historic time-line. A park history hike will follow the indoor portion of the program. Hiking is moderate.

Pond Life Trail Guide Training Workshop

April 24 (Sunday)

1-5 p.m.

Cost FREE

Preregister by 04/19

Class minimum 1, maximum 25

This FREE workshop is for our trail guides, park volunteers and Allen County teachers. We will go over the curriculum we offer in relation to pond life, amphibians, and the importance of wetlands, ponds, vernal pools and swamp forests.

Flower Moon Evening Saunter

May 15 (Sunday)

6-8 p.m.

Cost \$2 per person

Preregister by 5/12

Class minimum 1, maximum 25

An evening saunter to celebrate the wildflowers and evening birds of Fox Island!

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You are cordially invited to:
Fox Island Alliance Annual Meeting of Members
Sunday, May 1, 2022
Fox Island County Park

Park admission is free for FIA members

We hope that you will join us for an afternoon of fellowship, refreshments, fun, and learning!

Schedule of Events

- 2:00 p.m. Dedication ceremony of white pine tree in memory of Darrell Will, FIA Vice-President. Ceremony will take place by the Vera Dulin Building.
- 2:30 p.m. Refreshments served at the Nature Center
- 2:45 p.m. Guest Speaker: Scott Bergeson Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Biology, Purdue University Fort Wayne
- 3:30 p.m. Fox Island Alliance Annual Business Meeting

R.S.V.P. by Friday, April 15, 2022 to lizhincks11@gmail.com

Upcoming Programs (cont.)

Note: Most events meet at Fox Island Nature Center. To register or for more information, contact Natalie Haley at foxisland@allencountyparks.org or 260-449-3180. **If you send a check ahead of time, please specify in the memo line which class(es) you are paying for.**

Free Family Fishing at Fox Island

June 4 (Saturday)
Noon-3 p.m.
Cost \$2 park entry, children 6 and under free
Preregister by 5/31
Class minimum 1, maximum 35

Park Naturalist Natalie Haley, has some fishing poles that need some free use! Join her down at Bowman Lake and take your family fishing! Fox Island has fishing poles, tackle and bait. Just sign up and take your family fishing! This is a Free Fishing weekend in Indiana, so you don't need a fishing license for this event. A basic fishing program will be offered from noon-1 p.m. where you can learn how to "rig" your own pole – for adults as well!

Summer Solstice Night Hike

June 21 (Tuesday)
7-10 p.m.
Cost \$2 per person
Preregister not necessary
Class minimum 1, maximum 25

Join a park naturalist for a program on bats (7-8 p.m.) in the nature center followed up by a hike to Bowman Lake for an evening celebration of the summer solstice!





Fox Island Alliance

Ed Powers
12206 W. Yoder Road
Roanoke, IN 46783

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The **Fox Island Alliance** is a volunteer not-for-profit organization. Its purposes are to help preserve the natural features of Fox Island County Park, to assist its orderly development as a nature preserve, to raise funds to facilitate its development, to promote Fox Island's use as an educational center, and to coordinate volunteer efforts.

MEMBERSHIPS EXPIRE ON MARCH 31. CHECK YOUR ADDRESS LABEL TO BE SURE.

Use the application to the right and check "Renewal"

Fox Island Alliance Membership Application ___ **New** ___ **Renewal**

Name _____

Address _____

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___ Check if you would like to receive your Fox Tale by email

___ Check if you do not want your name published

Please Circle One:

Students \$5—Senior \$5—Two Seniors \$10—Military/Veteran \$5—
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If this membership is a gift, enter donor's name:

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Will your employer match your gift to FIA? Check with your Human Resources/Personnel Department.

FIA is a 501 (c) (3) organization; extra gifts are tax deductible.

Make your check payable to FIA, Inc. and mail with this form to:
Ed Powers, Membership 12206 W. Yoder Rd., Roanoke, IN 46783

www.foxislandalliance.org