



ILLINOIS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Guest Essay

Birding today: Better by far

by Jon Duerr

We often hear people (or ourselves) complain that birding is not as good as in the old days.

For me, the old days were the late 1950s and 1960s.

I strongly believe today is the period of great birding. I base this on three major points: Opportunity, attitude and mentorship.

I grew up and continue to live in St. Charles, Kane County. There were no forest preserves near me and parks were mowed playgrounds. Kane County had a forest preserve district but it amounted to fewer than 600 acres and was beyond bicycling range. There were a lot of traditional farms and farmland but they were private and only through the permission of the owner could one enter.

The prevailing attitude about the out of doors we mostly got from our parents and teachers. Nature was where one hunted, fished, gathered nuts and berries or avoided.

Kane County even paid bounties for crows (5 cents), hawks (10 cents) and foxes (an amazing \$5). My gang of friends and I did most of our nature study along the sights of our shotguns. We did not meet people who studied birds.

I had the good fortune to meet Floyd Swink in 1959 and he gave me encouragement with botany, but bird watching was not discussed.

By that time, the chemical age had become well established with both synthetic pesticides and herbicides gaining wide acceptance. It was not uncommon to find a robin or grackle dying a trembling death in the front yard.

The change in birding came April 22, 1970, Earth Day. The celebration was enormous with thousands of people on college campuses, high schools and city halls proclaiming the time had come to take care of our environment. The news media covered it from coast to coast. The politicians at that time were stuck in the morass of the Vietnam War, racial tensions, and civil unrest but here was something they could do: Save ferns, frogs, and falcons. They jumped at it.

Politicians awarded grants to states and local governments to buy land. Ironically, the source of the money was the newly created off-shore oil drilling leases. Illinois DOC (now DNR), forest preserves, conservation districts, parks, and even cities got millions for land acquisition. Kane County alone went from approximately 900 acres in 1970 to more than 12,000 acres by the year 2000. Now there were public places to go birding.

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