

# Excerpt from Michael Edmonds' book 'Taking Flight'

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from "Taking Flight: A History of Birds and People in the Heart of America," by Michael Edmonds, published by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. It is being reprinted with permission.*

I began birding more than thirty years ago, when my wife was pregnant for the first time. Anxious about my upcoming responsibilities, I did what many new fathers do. I ran for the hills—or, more accurately, for the swamps—where I distracted myself from impending fatherhood by trying to identify momentary bursts of color in Roger Tory Peterson's Field Guide to Birds of North America.

Mary and I had traveled that summer to a cabin poised on the edge of a northern lake. I was unpacking the car when a great blue heron floated silently past, almost close enough to touch. I'd never seen one before, never seen anything like it. When it landed on a small island just across from the cabin and stared back at me, I was hooked.

I later learned that almost every novice birder receives an invitation like that, and, as John Burroughs wrote in 1868, "The thrill of delight that accompanies it, and the feeling of fresh, eager inquiry that follows, can hardly be awakened by any other pursuit. . . . There is a fascination about it quite overpowering." I began spending as much time as I could outdoors with my eyes on the sky.

I came home before the baby arrived, of course, but not before I'd joined the ranks of nearly fifty million



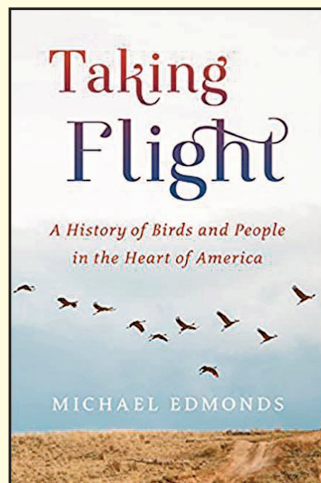
EDMONDS

American bird-watchers. That's how many of us head outdoors armed with binoculars or peer at birds on backyard feeders each year. In addition, more than two million hunters brave freezing winds every fall to shoot waterfowl and game birds in the United States. And hundreds of professional ornithologists study birds in universities, museums, and zoos.

Birds are all around us. They paddle along our shores, flee from our footsteps, perch on our fences, and soar above our houses. We see birds every time we step outside.

And we usually see what we expect to see. A wood duck perched on a low branch by a pond is a check mark for a birder, data to a biologist, a potential trophy for a hunter, and a source of wonder to a child. As an old Hindu proverb puts it, "When a pickpocket encounters a saint, all he notices are pockets." When we look at birds, we see what we look for. So did our ancestors.

Humans have inhabited the Midwest—the Great Lakes and the watersheds of the Ohio, upper Mississippi, and lower Missouri rivers—for thousands of years. Our predecessors in America's heartland shared this landscape with nearly all of the same birds that we do but saw them through very different eyes, which prompted them to act in very different ways. This



book describes the changing ways in which people have thought about and acted toward birds over the last twelve thousand years.

Many of our ancestors believed that if a whip-poor-will landed on your roof, death or bad luck was sure to follow. They thought swallows hibernated all winter in the mud beneath frozen ponds like frogs. They believed birds possessed souls, climbed high or dove deep into other realms, and could carry messages from the spirit world. They roasted vultures to smear the dripping fat on achy joints. They buried rooster claws under enemies' doorsteps to bring bad luck. They wore eagle feathers for courage and prayed to bird spirits for guidance. They held these views with the same certainty that we ascribe to scientific facts today. Like us, they saw their beliefs, desires, and values reflected in the birds that surrounded them.

For example, early white settlers regarded America's immense waves of passenger pigeons as free food and killed them recklessly. After all, their book of Genesis taught that God told them to "Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Three centuries later, the same biblical passage permitted rural hunters and urban diners to wipe out the last passenger pigeons.

But their American Indian neighbors saw passenger pigeons as children of the same Great Spirit that had created humans, as brethren, and honored them with ancient ceremonies before taking only as many as they needed. "Under our manner of securing them," recalled a nineteenth-century Seneca chief when the pigeons were nearly extinct, "they continued to increase." People in both communities conformed to the unspoken expectations of their time and place.

## Cambridge events

Continued from page 116

**July 28-Cambridge Lake Ripley Ride:** Featuring four distances: family friendly 16- and 22-mile (mostly flat) routes, a longer and slightly hilly 40-mile route, and a more challenging 62-mile metric century route. You will ride quiet country roads and visit Cambridge, Rockdale, Deerfield and Lake Mills. Registration includes a shirt, map/cue sheet, scenic rest stops, sag wagon, a sandy swimming beach, and a post-ride celebration featuring live music, refreshments and dinner provided by the Cambridge Lions Club. Start times between 7-9:30 a.m. Proceeds benefit the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and Cambridge Community Activities Program. Lake Ripley Park, Park Road. 608-423-8108, www.cambridgecap.net

**Aug. 3-5-Utica Festival:** Horse pull, live music, bingo, Badger State Super Farm & Hot Farm Tractor Pull, mini-rod pull, spectator truck pull, kids' sawdust money dig, softball tournament, food and concessions. Friday opens at 5 p.m., Saturday opens at 8 a.m., Sunday opens at 9 a.m. Utica Community Association Park in Utica, located between Cambridge and Stoughton. 608-764-8480, uticapark.org

**Aug. 19-Try Cambridge Tri:** This sprint distance triathlon will take you along the shores of Lake Ripley, traveling scenic country roads and through beautiful downtown Cambridge. The event will start at Ripley Park at 7 a.m., and features a 1/4 mile swim, 15 mile bike and 5k run. Lake Ripley Park, 4310 Park Rd., Cambridge, 608-423-8108, www.cambridgecap.net

**Sept. 15-Fall Fest:** Tractor hayrides, scarecrow building, chainsaw artist live demo, live music, pie contest, auction benefitting the Cambridge Food Pantry, bee-keeping demo, face painting and FFA farm animal petting zoo. Veterans Park, 100 E. Main St. The Cambridge Community Activities Program will also be conducting its annual Fun Run and Family Wellness Fair in the morning at downtown West Side Park. 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. 608-423-3780, www.cambridgewi.com

**Sept. 30-Barktoberfest:** Free and fun canine festival and party for you and your dog(s). The festival includes vendors, rescue groups, dog demos, a demonstration of lure coursing, costume and trick contests with great prizes, food and more. 11 a.m.-3 p.m. "Yappy Hour" 3-5 p.m. West Side Park, Cambridge. 608-345-8821, www.cambridgewi.com

*Information compiled from internet sources, including local chamber of commerce websites, municipal websites, the Wisconsin Department of Tourism's www.travelwisconsin.com, and other websites, unless noted.*



Youngsters on bicycles horse around on a hot day in Cambridge. (Photo courtesy of the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce)

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