

Kenosha/Racine Land Trust article for the JT Community Newsletter

Close to Nature

On 216th Avenue in Salem, Wisconsin, there is a long, curving driveway that leads into 20 acres of avian paradise. At the end of the drive, there is an artfully designed, contemporary house nestled at the wood's edge. It is home to books about birds, a number of good art pieces with birds as the subject and an articulate, unassuming man dedicated to preserving his valuable conservation efforts. Maryellen and two beautiful immensely fluffy white Great Pyrenees Mountain Dogs live there as well. His name is Warren Close, and his property is a true delight to birds and humans alike. And because Warren has placed a conservation easement on the land with the Kenosha/Racine Land Trust, it will remain a sanctuary for wildlife and future residents in perpetuity.

The Close property has a variety of habitats that sustain year-round resident and migratory birds as well. It contains everything they require for survival: quality food in abundance, and not just from feeders, and water, shelter, and nesting space. Walking the trails that Warren installed and has maintained over the years allows a visitor to wind seemingly endlessly through woods, around a pond and through the prairie. Woodpeckers drum, blue jays issue loud warnings and chickadees buzz in accompaniment to a late summer hike. A hawk rides the thermals overhead.

The half acre pond is undergoing rejuvenation. Over the years Warren has observed all of the native duck species found in Wisconsin visiting his pond; however, diversity has declined due to increased vegetation around the perimeter. Restoration involves removing trees and shrubs to allow easier access for waterfowl and planting native species to improve habitat for birds and other wildlife.

It is not just birds and bird lovers that find a happy home here. Native Wisconsin plant species are in excellent representation, and it is a treat in all four seasons. Bright red-orange Jack-in-the-pulpit seed heads demand attention from the passerby. Carrion vine is lush and vibrant green moss cascades over fallen logs. For a time in years past, Warren and his late wife planted and harvested Christmas trees and some remain still.

In stark contrast to the cool shadows of the woods, the white-hot sun in the open land areas becomes like a hiking partner to be carried along the trail. The prairie islands are thick with late summer native species like asters in white, magenta and lavender hues, sunflower, Canada goldenrod resplendent in yellow, and all manner of beneficial insects. The goldenrod needs reduction to allow for better diversity and Warren hopes to find assistance with this ambitious project. He credits his wife for helping him learn the botanical names for the plants, and at one point he knew all the plants species on the property. Warren's amateur naturalist skills were so strong that he volunteered them and his teaching ability to Bong State Recreation Area in his younger days.

Warren is acutely aware of the non-monetary value of his property. As habitats shrink and what remains becomes degraded, his and other properties like it will be the last repositories for native plant and animal species - last stands as it were for diversity. He hopes that more people will soon become aware of the importance of high quality open space and set it aside rather than pave it over for yet another commercial or residential development. He hopes that through his actions more people will become aware of their options.

Warren Close – his love and appreciation of birds made tangible through his foresight and commitment to conservation and habitat preservation. We are all fortunate indeed through his past and present efforts and we are grateful as well.

Nan Calvert, Ecological Consultant
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To obtain membership information or learn more about Kenosha/Racine Land Trust preservation efforts, write to K/RLT at P.O. Box 085153, Racine, WI 53408-5153 or call us at 262-552-6861. Additional information is available on the web at www.krlt.org.