Openlands Lakeshore Preserve Podcast
Messengers from Afar: Birds of the Preserve

NARRATOR: We hear them all the time. We see them everywhere. Perhaps because birds are so common, many people don’t really give them much notice. And yet birds are creatures of a wilderness that once defined our land.

ROSEN: "They are all that is left of the wild world. There’s almost no place you can go in America where you can’t hear a bird. That cannot be said about most other wild creatures."

NARRATOR: Jonathan Rosen is the author of "The Life of the Skies: Birding at the End of Nature." He and other bird enthusiasts give many reasons for their fascination. Birds have beautiful bright colors. They descended from dinosaurs. They sing and fly. But birds also bring a bit of the wild into the city.

ROSEN: "People often say why do you go birding in parks in the city and I say, well, if buffalo migrated through the park in my neighborhood I would absolutely go out to see them. Birds are the last wild animals left that migrate in abundance that you can go out and see almost anywhere."

NARRATOR: That includes Openlands Lakeshore Preserve. For most of the year you’ll find many of the common birds that live around here – robins, blue jays, woodpeckers, an occasional hawk. But for a few weeks each Spring and Fall, this stretch of lakefront becomes part of a transcontinental highway.

KLICK: "During migration, it’s a different story. Essentially every bird that breeds in the eastern half of Canada passes through these ravines here."

NARRATOR: Ken Klick is a Restoration Ecologist with the Lake County
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KLICK: "Lake Michigan, the Great Lake flyway is a very important corridor for those migrating birds. So, literally, if you sat in one spot during migration you could probably see over 300 species of birds. It's quite remarkable."

NARRATOR: The abundance of migrating birds at Bartlett Ravine is exciting to witness, but the birds come here for a good reason: this is one of very few undeveloped places remaining along Lake Michigan.

KLICK: "These ravines are very important for the resting, for the feeding and foraging activities of these migrating birds, so it's an important stopover."

NARRATOR: Birds use a lot of energy to migrate - they fly hundreds of miles a day - and need a lot of food to support that effort. They often fly at night, and usually along waterways. At daybreak when they find themselves over Lake Michigan, they head to shore, looking for food and a safe place to rest. A ravine with a healthy ecosystem will have a variety of native invertebrates - spiders, mites, caterpillars, beetles - and the birds will have plenty to eat. Urban areas or habitats dominated by invasive species will not support that diversity. The birds won't find enough food and they have to move on.

As the Openlands restoration plan continues, Bartlett Ravine should become more and more attractive to migrating birds looking for a meal. The ravine also offers good shelter – it’s one of the only places along Lake Michigan where birds can move in off the beach for nearly a mile of undeveloped woods and shrubs.

NARRATOR: Throughout history birds have inspired the human imagination. They appear in cave paintings, hieroglyphs and ancient ruins. They are characters in myths and folk tales. They're pictured on money and flags. We name sports teams after birds. In art, poetry and song they symbolize freedom; and the caged bird, the loss of freedom.

ROSEN: "Birds, because they're these wonderful mediating creatures that move between earth and sky, and also of course between the wild world
and the urban world, they feel almost like messengers. So if you see a bird in the middle of a park on the shores of Lake Michigan, it may well have travelled hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. And although you're seeing it in a very small scrap of land, it brings with it a little element of the rainforest where it might spend the winter, and of someplace far north where it will breed, and so suddenly your imagination encircles the whole world, and you have this visitor from the wild world that is nevertheless in your own neighborhood. They pass right through your world. It's the ultimate intersection of the human and the wild. And birds, however small they may be, are as wild as lions."

NARRATOR: And like lions, birds need a large territory. The Preserve is small but vital to birds. Local birds that live and breed here year round typically need at least a square mile of territory, so the Preserve may be part but not all of their territory. But migrating birds depend on land in several places, even on different continents.

ROSEN: "To fall in love with birds is to become an environmentalist automatically - because you want to save the park where you see the birds. Then you realize that if the rainforest where they spend the winter is destroyed, then you will not be seeing the birds in your park in Chicago. And then you realize if the place where they breed in the northern United States or Canada is destroyed or that habitat is degraded, then you also won't be seeing the birds. And so suddenly you go from simply enjoying them, you come to realize that without actively acting to save these places, there won't be any birds."

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