

# Prairie Rapids Audubon Society

## General Meeting Minutes

May 9, 2023

Submitted by Kris Rash

Following a four-year break from life as we once knew it the Prairie Rapids Audubon Society gathered at 6:00 p.m. for their annual potluck and perhaps for two of the things they do best, visit and eat. Thanks to everyone who provided the tasty offerings. Who doesn't love a potluck?

President Tom Schilke called the PRAS May 9, 2023 meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. after all were pleasantly satiated. He followed with a report that Waterloo mayor, Quentin Hart, has once again issued a proclamation that Iowa's first Bird Friendly City will continue to stress the importance of birds in the community of Waterloo.

Today was a busy day for some PRAS members as several of them took part in introducing a portion of the 450 5<sup>th</sup> graders that attend Bremer County schools to birding and astronomy among other outdoor activities. A nearly perfect day and a very cooperative catbird made for a good experience.

A thank you goes out to First Presbyterian Church for our meeting space (yes, we do pay a small rental fee). They installed a new and larger projection screen that is much appreciated. We in turn purchased a new router that should make everyone's viewing enjoyment better. These are some of your Bird-A-Thon donations at work.

May is probably one of the best times to experience songbird migration. Many members reported warbler sightings as these tiny creatures in their freshest breeding plumage are crossing our state. Check both the Birdcast (spring and fall) and MOTUS tower sites online to see what may have flown overhead during the night.

Naturalist, Katie Klus, from Hartman Reserve Nature Center, related exciting news about a nature art mural to be painted by Caylin Graham, a former artist in residence at Hartman. One more reason to pay a visit to the reserve.

Our most recent treasurer's report from Francis Moore showed a balance of \$6,499.27 in our general account. The bird feed fund stands at \$268.63. Most feeders are on a summer break while birds are nesting and feeding their young, juicy, protein-packed insects and caterpillars.

The Iowa Ornithologist's Union is celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Their fall meeting will be taking place at Hartman Reserve Nature Center with plenty of opportunities for birding and learning from great speakers and those around you. Mark your calendars for the weekend of September 22 and stay tuned for details of events.

An introduction of our board of directors and officers was made by President Tom. All officers have agreed to another one-year term in office. Also, up for re-election to another two-year term were Ken Heiar and Dennis Schmadeke. All were elected unanimously. Leaving the board are Bill Hemmes and Joel and Linda Haack. They have all been valuable assets to PRAS for their many years of service. The Haacks will continue to edit our newsletter and get it ready for the printer. If you see any of these people, thank them personally. Would you like to be on the board or help in the kitchen on meeting night? Let a board member know. We have a lot of fun.

I will confess that I was excited about tonight's featured speaker, Neil Hamilton, and his titled presentation "Lessons from the land, the River and Nature". I had read his book "The Land Remains" and heard him interviewed on IPR's Talk of Iowa with Charity Nebbe. He was speaking to a choir member (although his voice is so much better than mine) when he wrote this book and I wanted some ideas on what I could say to others.

Check your May Red Tail or the web site to get an idea of Neil's incredible credentials. His book is written from his own experiences of teaching agricultural law at Drake University and serving on various ag and land trust boards. Additional perspectives are given from the "Back 40" acres of the farm where he was raised and that had been originally purchased by his family in 1870.

His book reminds us of Iowa's long legacy of conservation leaders dating back to the early 1900's. They include greats such as John Lacey, Ding Darling, Henry Wallace, Ada Hayden and Aldo Leopold. Lacey in particular was responsible as a member of the U.S. Congress for getting the Antiquities Act passed allowing the U.S. president to set aside federally owned properties for their natural beauty or other unique significance.

Neil stressed that we are all landowners in the form of public lands. Unfortunately, Iowa ranks 49<sup>th</sup> of the 50 states in the percentage of land dedicated to public ownership and use. To make matters worse those lands include roadside rights-of-way and the bottoms and banks of meandered streams. Have you ever tried to spread your picnic blanket in the middle of a highway median?

The Iowa Dept. of Natural Resources, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation and The Nature Conservancy in Iowa are among those groups that acquire suitable land for our recreational use. While the DNR is tax funded, the non-profits rely on our donations. Currently the INHF has 132,000 acres in 97 counties under their protection. Without the help of non-profits many wonderful areas would be lost to private ownership. As Neil said, "The most destructive things in our state are bulldozers."

Addressing the state of agriculture itself is an entirely different issue. The crop land is being farmed in a way that we wouldn't have recognized 50 years ago. Mono-cultures of corn and soybeans go on for acres with livestock tucked away in buildings known as CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations). A large share of the land is farmed by renters with the owners living far away. Through cooperation from owner and tenant agreement can be reached on what is the best plan for everyone. Surprisingly, sixty-percent of our corn crop now goes into ethanol production, not into food directly feeding humans. Top soils continue to erode away.

However, as Neil reassured us, land is resilient and will outlive us. With additional incentives farmers will adopt methods to ensure soil health and climate protection. Cover crops to protect soil from erosion and build nutrients through the winter are good alternative if affordable. The state's Nutrient Reduction Strategy is now 10 years old and has a number of viable programs to reduce fertilizer and soil runoff but currently has no monitoring program to check on its success. Our Soil and Water Conservation Districts are one place to start paying respect to our land and water. As Neil puts it our "Watershed Citizenship" is one way to think about it. We all live in one of the 1,600 watersheds in Iowa. Do your part. Become more educated. Write to your legislator. Urge them to fully fund REAP (Resource Enhancement and Protection) during the next legislative session. If you don't know what it is, find out. It's been in existence for over 30 years. Then read Neil's next book, "The River Knows".

Thank you, Neil, for gracing us with your presence and making us more aware of this place we call home.