

St. Charles Park District

Nature News – May 1

You know what it's like when you know where something's supposed to be, but you just can't seem to find it? For me it happens all the time with things like coffee cups and car keys. And nature.

Take, for instance, a naturalist program I was involved with several years ago when I worked for a different park district. Each month the Fun Fridays gang and I would travel to a local park or forest preserve, ostensibly to see nature in action. We tapped maple trees and marveled at wildflowers, and oohed and aahed at fall colors.

Then came The Eagle Incident.

The group had announced that they would like to see bald eagles and I, knowing that Starved Rock State Park had a sizeable winter population, naively booked a trip there for February. After hearing reports of dozens of eagles congregated by the dam, I upped the ante and also made plans to stop at the Army Corps of Engineers' Illinois Waterway Visitors Center in Utica. The facility's close proximity to the Illinois River and dam would give us fantastic views, I thought, as visions of eagles danced in my head.

The morning of the trip dawned bright and clear. And during the hour and half ride there, the bus was filled with the hum of animated chatter. Everyone, it seemed, was excited to see our nation's symbol—dozens of them, in fact—soaring, diving, and perching majestically in the trees.

But when we pulled up to the Army Corps facility, something didn't seem quite right. The parking lot was empty. Perhaps more important, so, too, were the trees. There was not an eagle in sight.

Inside, our buddy Ranger Bob informed us that, you betcha, there had indeed been dozens of eagles there just a few days before. But some recent warm weather had melted the river ice, and prompted the eagles to disperse.

Only one bird remained, Ranger Bob said, and it was high in a cottonwood tree. He graciously offered us use of the center's spotting scope, so we could see the regal bird a little better. But a large branch obscured our view. And, worse, the bird was facing away from us. All we could see was a small expanse of bald eagle rump.

Bless their hearts. That same group, seemingly undeterred, never gave up. They traveled with me to listen to springtime frogs—we heard none, but did see a dead northern leopard frog on a bridge; to Lake County to see brown bats—which were invisible in the dark spaces between the rafters of their daytime roost; and to Cosley Zoo in Wheaton to see their Blanding's turtle exhibit—which was moved to a new location shortly before our arrival.

See the trend here?

I was reminded of these Fun Fridays phenomena last weekend, when I traveled to southern Illinois last weekend to take in the region's semiannual snake migration.

If you've never seen this twice-yearly trek, it's quite a sight to behold. Snakes of all types travel in spring from their winter hibernacula in the Pine Hills bluffs of Shawnee National Forest, across Forest Service Road 345, and into the swamps and woods that dot the area, then back again in fall.

In years past I've seen black rat snakes, redbelly snakes, brown snakes, garter snakes, ribbon snakes, rough green snakes. At the risk of sounding like Forrest Gump's buddy Bubba (substitute "shrimp" for "snake" and you'll know what I mean) I've also seen northern water snakes, yellowbelly water snakes, diamondback water snakes, juvenile racer snakes, cottonmouth snakes, timber rattlesnakes and even, memorably, an eastern hognose snake.

But this year...nothing. Not a single snake could be found on the gravel road, which is closed to vehicles from March 15 to May 15, and again from September 1 to October 31. The surrounding environs yielded none as well, though we did find several species of frogs and salamanders.

I guess the unseasonably warm weather we experienced here hit southern Illinois as well. Temperatures near 90 had the snakes on the move sooner, and more quickly, than usual.

But did a lack of snakes ruin the trip? Absolutely not—just as a lack of eagles, frogs, bats and turtles didn't dampen the enthusiasm of our Fun Fridays crowd. Because even if what you think you were going to see isn't there, there's always something else to take its place. That's the beauty of nature.

Now if I could only find where I put my coffee cup. And car keys.

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