

Winter

Spring

Summer

Autumn

Spring

Continuing an account of a year
at the Celery Farm Natural Area

R. H. Kane

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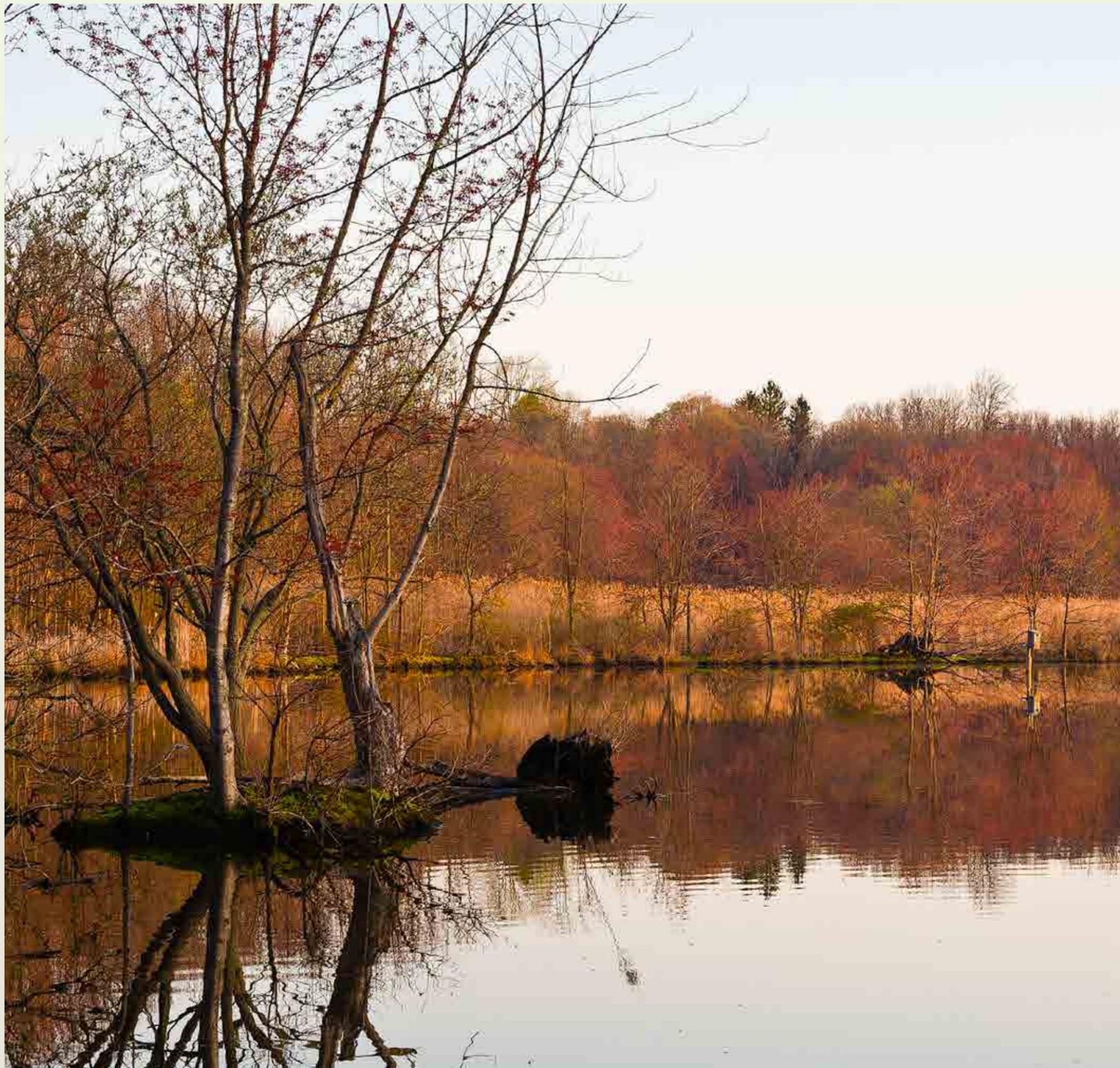
Cover photograph: View across the pond from the Pirie-Mayhood platform.

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SPRING

A SEASON AT THE CELERY FARM
NATURAL AREA

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY R. H. KANE



INTRODUCTION

It is a tiny natural sanctuary in this upscale suburban town not far from New York City, mostly hidden from view, but birds have the advantage of altitude and even a small wooded area with open water is not difficult to find, if wind and weather cooperate.

You already know that the Celery Farm Natural Area is an unusual gem if you are a regular visitor, or have read the first e-book in this series, or perhaps even if you just live in Bergen County, New Jersey. This small natural space affords birds and wildlife an accessible sanctuary for both transients and permanent residents and lets us enjoy them close to home. The four seasons provide very different experiences for both wild creatures and visitors, and this, the second in the series, takes us from the end of winter to the photographic doldrums of summer at the Preserve.

If this book provides your first view of the place, the tour of the Celery Farm from the *WINTER* volume is repeated at the end of the narrative, with some new photographs. The notes on photographing here follow, with details on how the images were made. Experienced

visitors and photographers may just wish to browse the new images in those sections.

Perhaps I was overly hasty in the above: living in northwest Bergen doesn't mean that one even knows the Celery Farm exists, although awareness grows every year. The small dirt parking lot is unobtrusive. There's little to suggest its identity as a nature preserve from the road. There are no amenities except for a few memorial benches and three small viewing platforms, and features are not identified. Even if you are a local, you and your neighbors may never have heard of it before.

You may wish to refer to this [map](#), prepared by the Fyke Nature Association. Fyke and the Borough of Allendale jointly manage the Celery Farm, by the way, and you are welcome to join and help protect the Preserve. The place is not refined, however, and only enough is done to keep it accessible; it will not always be a comfortable place to visit.

One never knows what a particular year will bring to the photographer. This is a chronicle of a com-

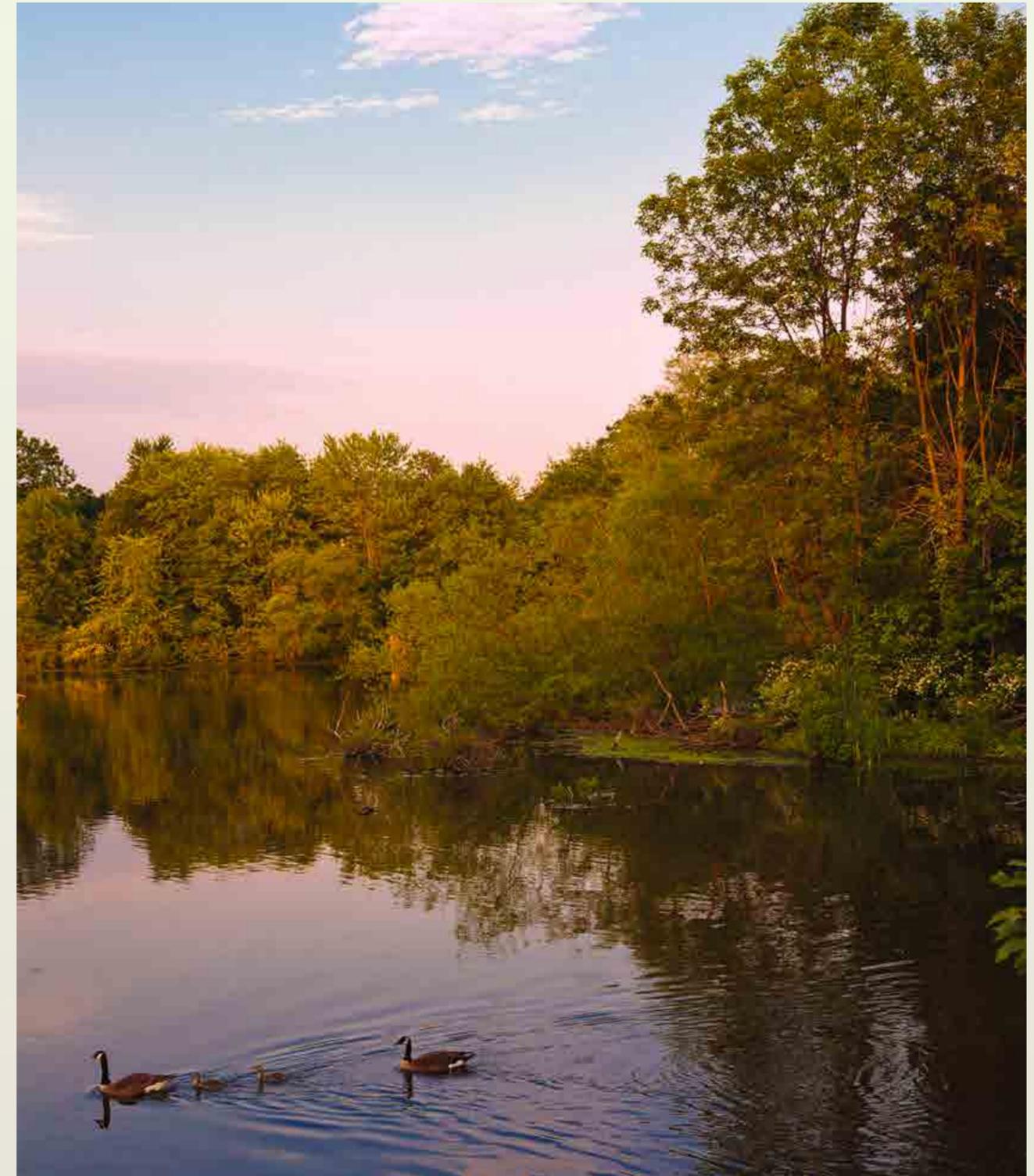
posite spring as I visited and observed for three decades, and photographed seriously between about 2005 and the present. As a result, this view of the Preserve is more optimistic in terms of the birds and wildlife you might see in your own visits. It's a photo-essay, not a documentary or natural history and reflects only my own experiences and the views and creatures I wish to remember, just as your impressions of birding at other places are probably composites. Others will see the Celery Farm somewhat differently, enjoy different aspects of it, and describe it in different terms.

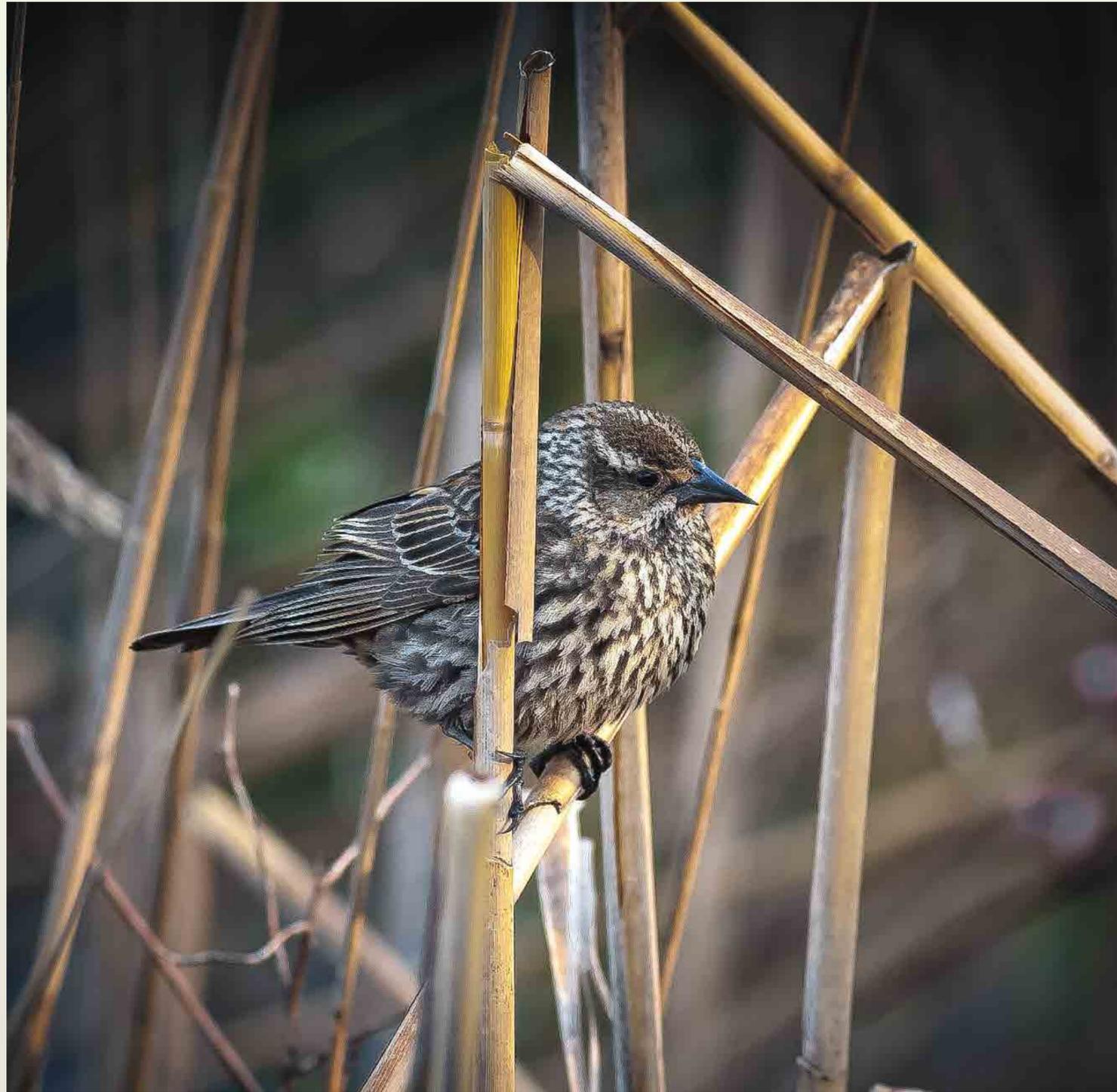
Where it has made just some sort of sense I have included photographs that simply appeal to me, sometimes without ironclad justification in terms of the narrative; in other instances, images may have less photographic interest but provide a meaningful view or emphasize a point; don't judge all images by the same rules. Thanks go to my wife, Terri, and friends and fellow photographers, especially John Pastore, who read and commented on the manuscript. Errors and opinions are all mine, of course.

So here we have a hundred-acre wood with a large pond, tucked in the 'burbs, where deer increasingly

find refuge, waterfowl summer and breed, turtles and carp have their way in the water, and warblers drop in for a time in spring and autumn. Here we find the annual dramas of life in the wild, writ small, with creatures that (mostly) do not threaten us and, to varying degrees, let us visit with them and watch their activities within a short drive from home. It's often just a walk in the park, so to speak—this isn't a park—but for persistent visitors there are occasional rewards that keep us returning and photographing.

We begin at the dreariest time of year at the Celery Farm, just before the beginning of spring, and travel through the most wonderful. Those who have read *WINTER* will recognize that not just seasons overlap; book volumes and some photographs may as well.

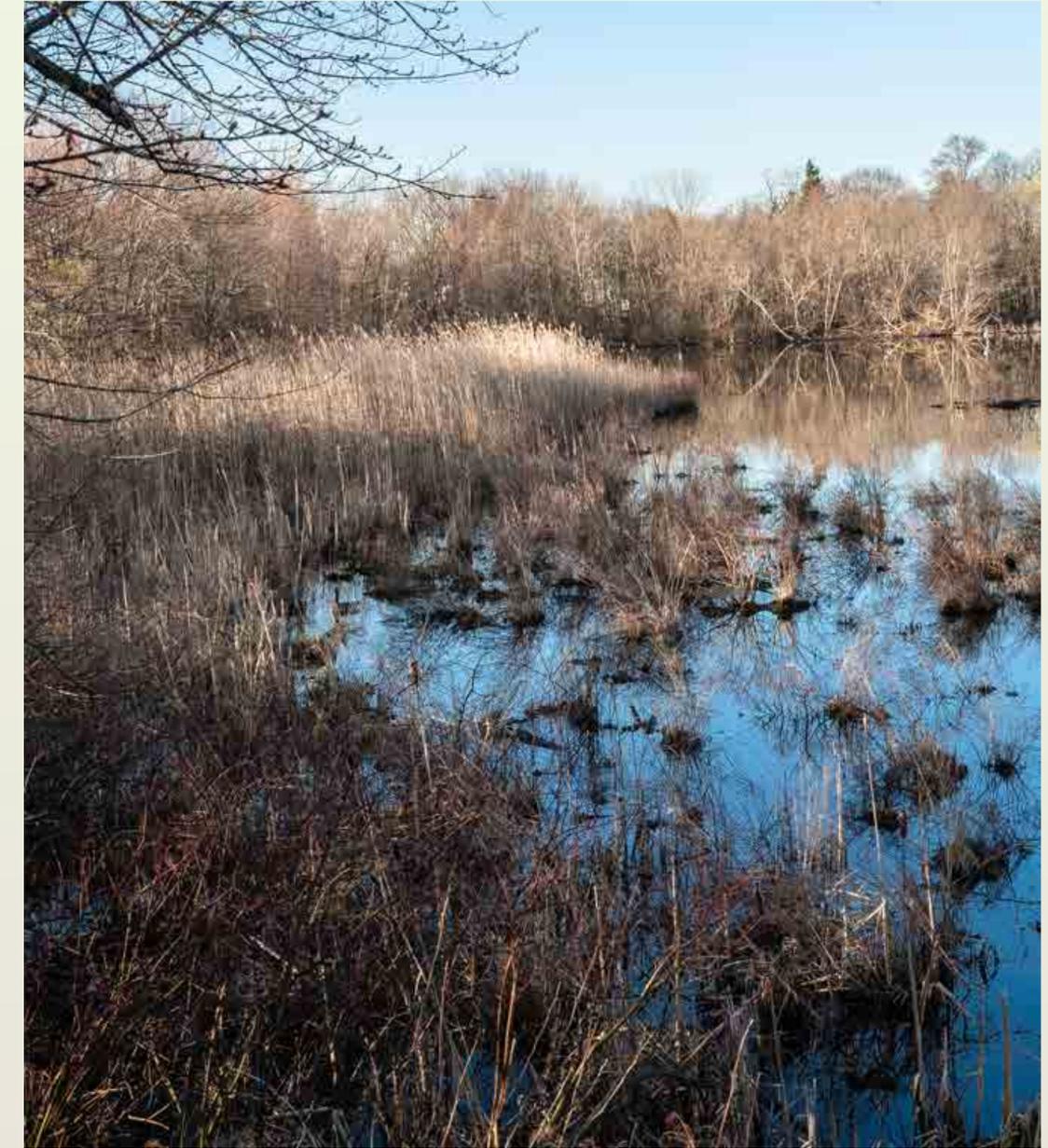




SPRING

We normally have a fine spring here, welcome relief from the eight, ten or twelve weeks of raw winter that we have managed to tolerate. The doldrums begin to clear away in March; the drabness isn't over, but the promise is there, and it is enough for now. We slog through the mud and ice at the Celery Farm anticipating the arrival of birds and waterfowl, smiling at the skunk cabbage poking through the snow, and at the red haze on the trees which promises renewal soon.

March usually does come in like a lion in northern New Jersey. There is no typical onset of spring, and the month may leave as a lion as well. Much of March may be full of promise, at least in our minds, but it is still winter here. Paths are sodden and, at least in the morning, frozen and rutted. Only a few early arrivals call from bare branches or the tops of phrags.





The red-winged blackbirds arrive early, often in February. They manage in the cold, calling from trees and phrags. Branches carry heavier buds by now, although leafing-out is weeks away. The pond clears in fits and starts. It can still refreeze and collect another snow cover before finally conceding to gradual warmth.

Mute swans may also check in early. A breeding pair may have already landed, even in the snow, waiting for clearings in the ice.

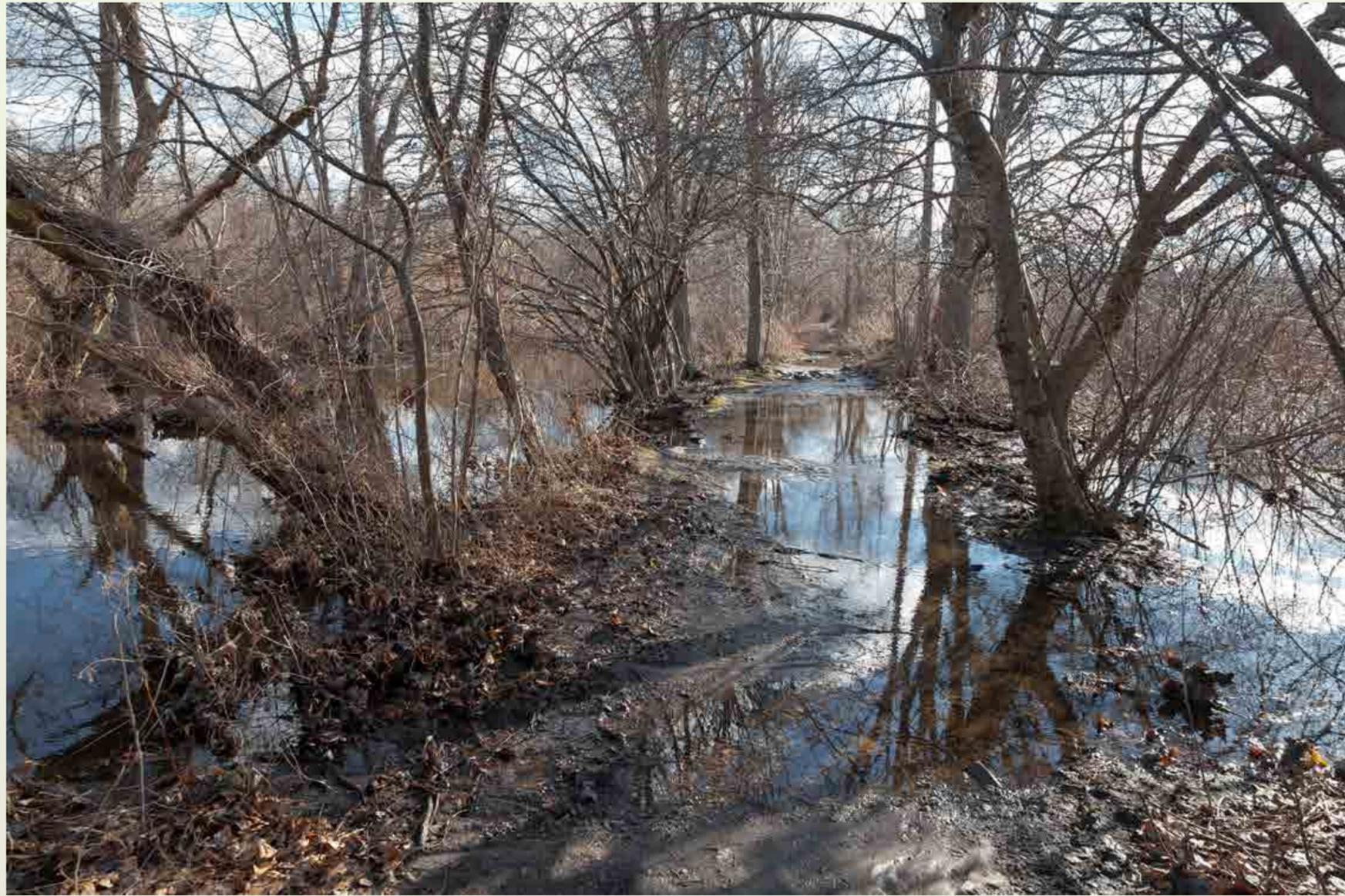


This year, a brutal winter came early and stayed late. Below an unbroken ice cap, the sluggish but still active fish used the available oxygen and have suffocated by the score. We find opportunistic gulls, crows and turkey vultures scattered along breaks in the ice to feed. Creatures have dragged corpses from the pond onto the paths at night. Minor fish kills have occurred in the past but this one was memorable. With fewer carp to churn the bottom the pond will be clearer than we can remember for months.

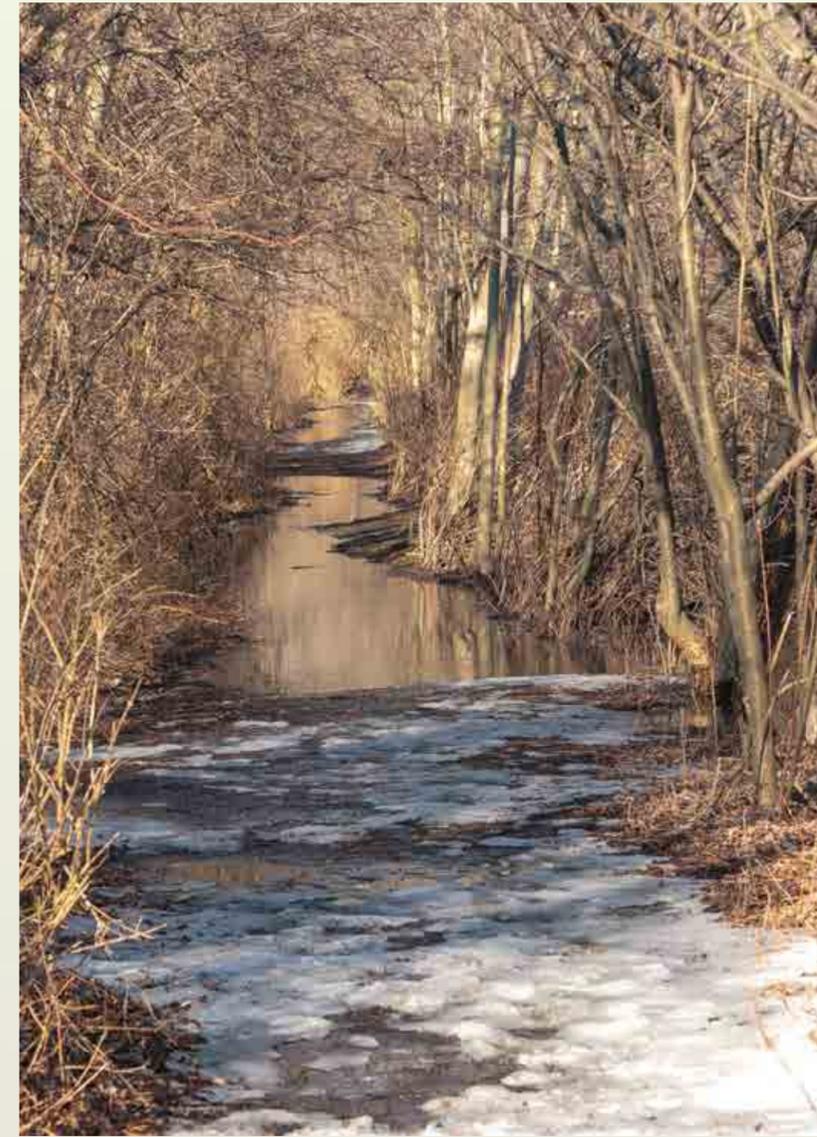


Arrival for some is sometimes too early. The swans may go to sleep in clear water only to find themselves ice-bound in the morning. Only after the ice is clear will they enjoy an exercise flight.



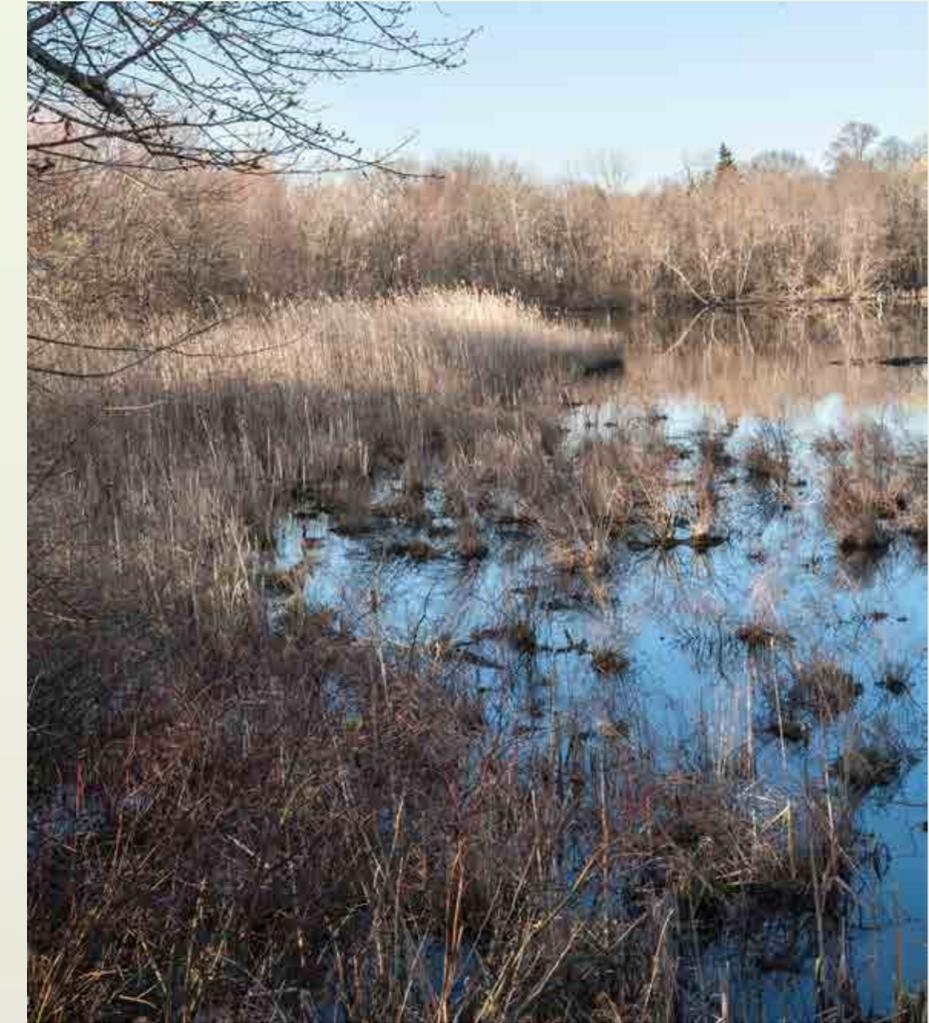


During March, snow finally yields to the rain and the Preserve shows its drab self. When the rains are heavy or frequent, mud ruins the trails. Runoff from downpours swells Lake Appert. The brook will extend its reach to the pond, flooding the paths. It is worse when downpours come hard before the ground thaws.

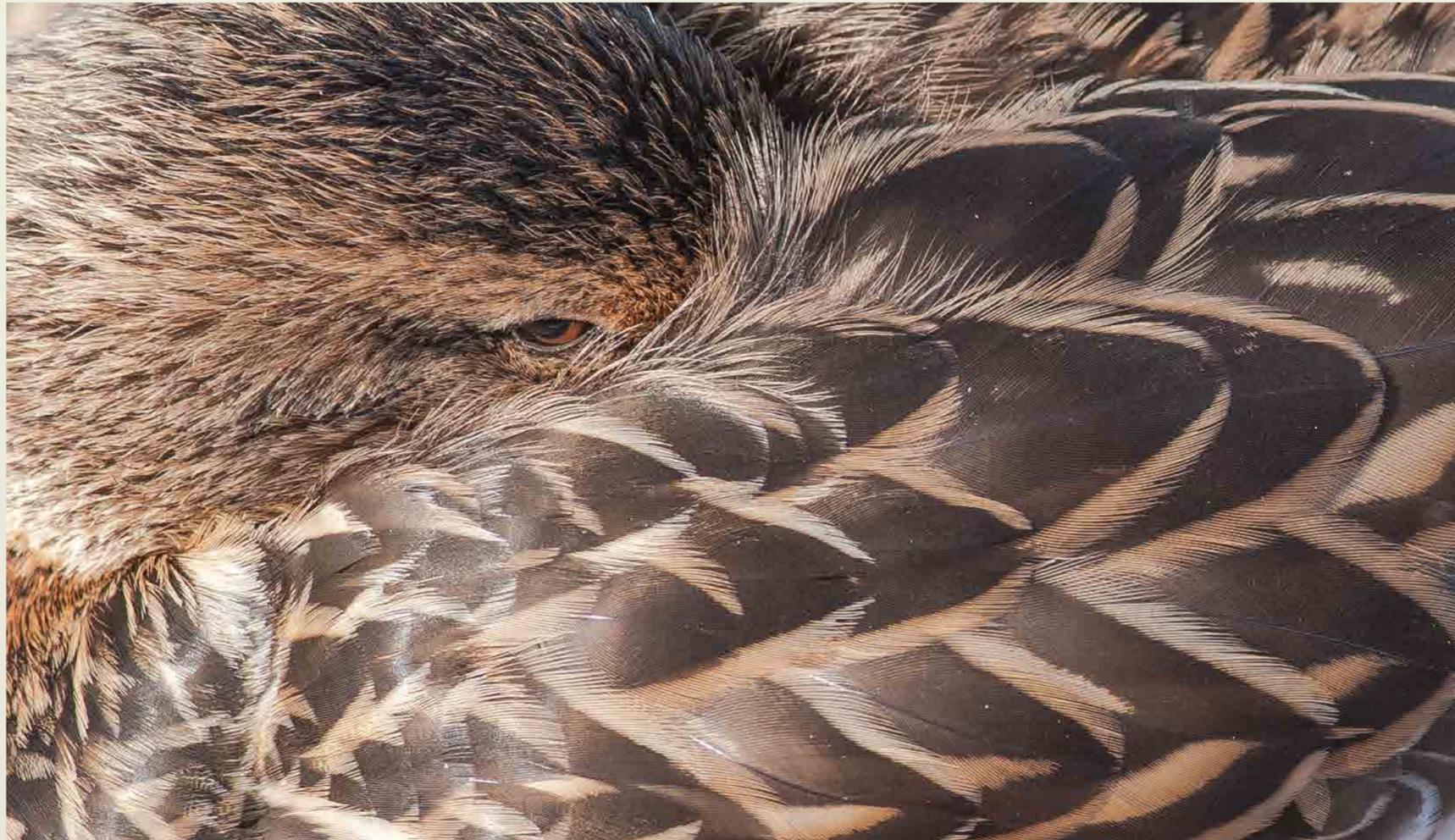


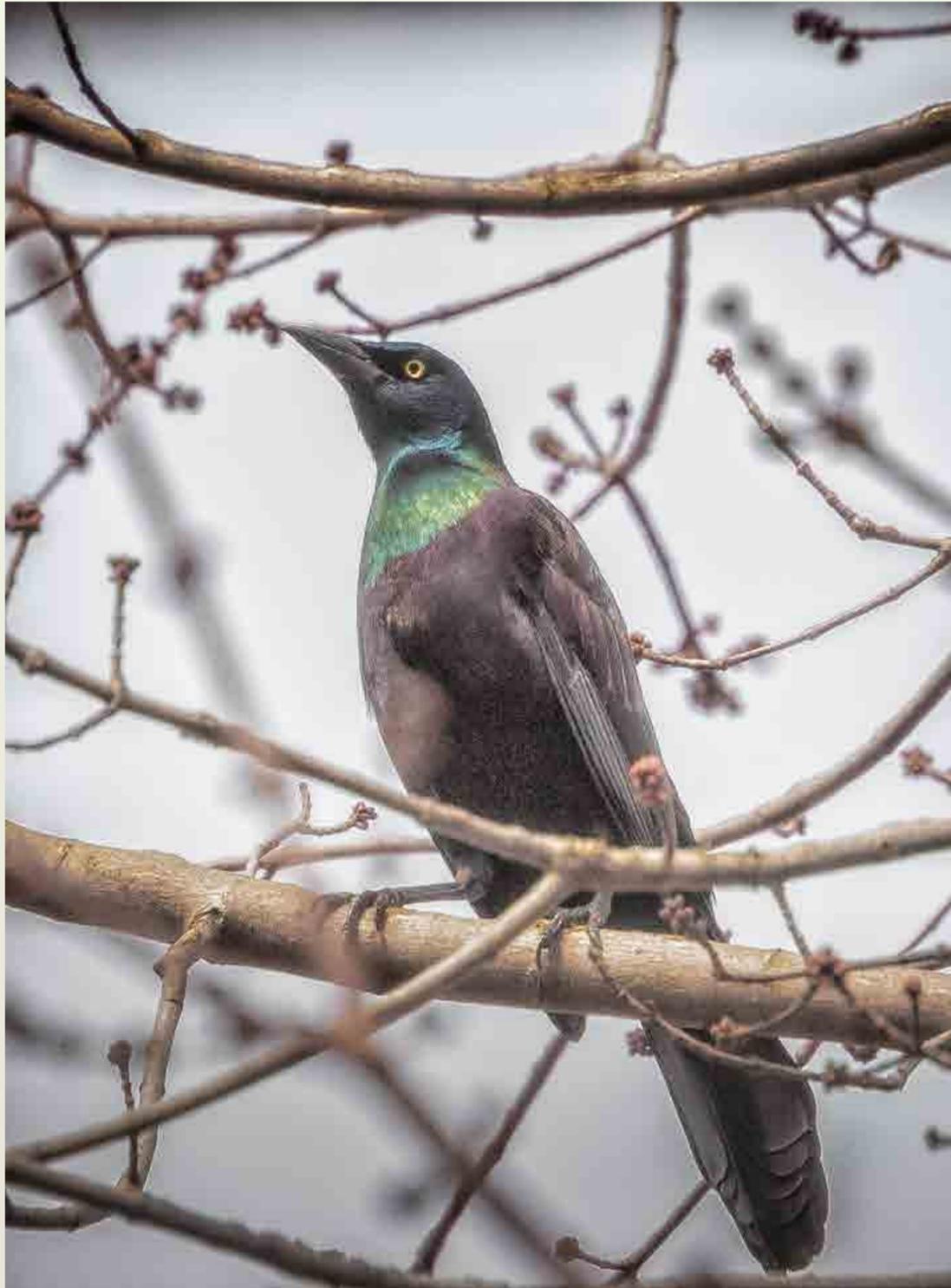
It is an unpredictable time. Even after the rain and tentative warming a late snow may still fall on the Preserve, extending the time we must deal with ice and mud. In some years the lake may stay frozen for nearly all of March. Floods could come yet again this season. Creative developers find new ways to hardscape Bergen County, and the Preserve has suffered for it.

Old friends return one by one. More and more mallards arrive, often having to make do without clear water for days on end if they are too early. We will find them in the brook and on the shore asleep, or pretending to be. We are watched as much as we watch.



Transient visitors, perhaps ruddy ducks, could stop in, or hooded mergansers may spend some time at Phair's Pond after the final thaw. Shovelers or teals, too, perhaps, may visit and spend a few days on the lake.



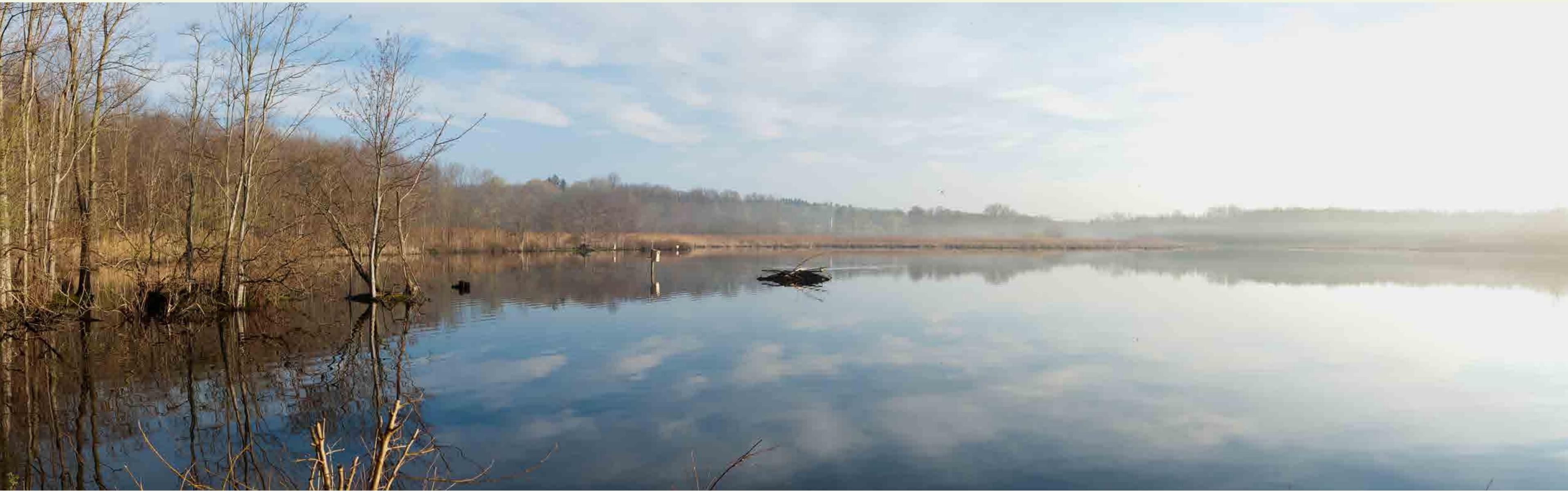


You will find grackles, some already in breeding plumage, at almost any time in March.

Canada geese return in force as the ice clears. It is a pleasure to watch them in lines as they land, before we remember how happy we were to see them go last year. Now they struggle over nesting places. A psychopathic goose might assault us, too, during a random hormonal eruption.

As the pond warms, the geese can finally enjoy a soaking. They must still deal with ice when the pond re-freezes on colder nights, and wait for warmer days. There is little else to do but squabble.





Mornings can be lovely as April approaches, especially on a rare calm day. But the Warden's Watch is always cooler than we expect. If the wind is from the north we will be glad for hat and mittens.



We are still just at the doorstep of official spring, in a year where the ice has cleared. Red-wings have been staking out territory and the wood duck hens are examining nesting boxes, taking their time choosing. It may be weeks before a suitable apartment is selected.

Weeks after arriving the swan has decided on a site, within viewing distance. That happens rarely; photographers are lucky this year. The pair will protect the nest aggressively so perhaps it is best that this castle has a moat. A swan coming ashore is more than intimidating. They cooperate in the building and when the nest is finally finished she will lay. The cob will begin his lonely rounds of the



pond that will last for the next weeks. He will return to visit her often. Song sparrows are heard everywhere now. The juncos and many of the white-throats begin to drift away north. With snow nearly gone, squirrels and chipmunks become more active on the ground.





It is not quite spring yet—dreary and cold mornings are still likely when you visit—but there is promise. On dry days, or when the mud is not too assertive and the sun is out, the Preserve seems ready for its annual renewal.



More color begins to show. Progress is slow, but tufts of onion grass appear and skunk cabbage shoots poke higher, even through the little remaining snow. Pussy willow erupts and buds fatten on the trees. Clumps of snowdrops, long buried in snow, now brighten several places. Each day adds to the minutes of daylight, most generously now around the equinox, and the sun continues higher in the sky. Better light makes the paths seem less bleak, even with the so-far scant evidence of spring. Still, even after the first formal day of spring, a rare patch of ice may reform on the pond or the misery of a cold, foggy rain will keep you at home.



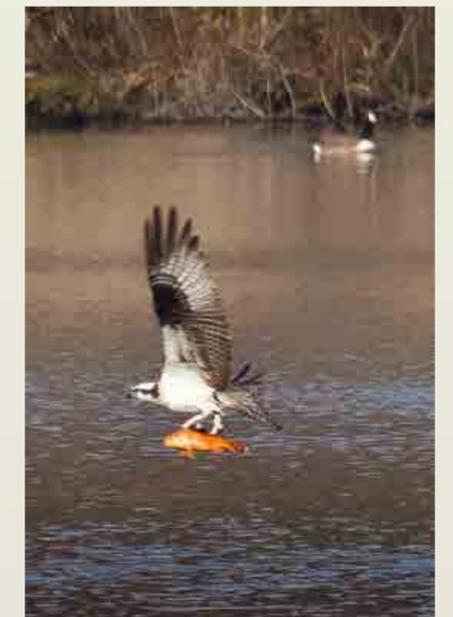


Now the birds begin to show themselves, both small and large.



The lake was turbid before winter; fishing was poor for ospreys and visits were infrequent. With ice cleared from the pond and the algae not yet growing, they find clear water to hunt. Carp, especially the brightly colored ones just newly active after the winter, have no refuge. An osprey may now arrive around the same time every day, as if on a schedule.

Our woodies continue the nest search, still undecided. She may even elect to dump her eggs in an existing clutch, quite possible here with the nest boxes in sight of each other. We just don't know how a hen thinks.

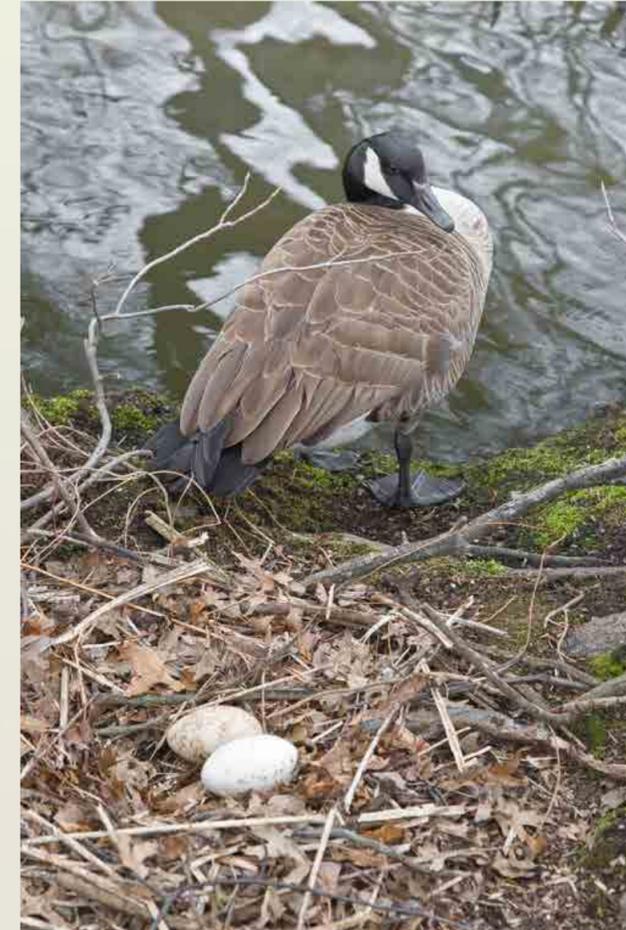




If you are quiet and lucky a snipe may come out of the reeds to browse in the shallows, poking at debris as it wanders. If he wishes to hide he nearly vanishes. He is not always a cooperative visitor; we have indeed been lucky this week (and this year) at the Pirie-Mayhood platform.



Near the end of March the geese begin their mating rituals in earnest. They often appear brutal to human eyes, at least in refined circles. In a warm year there will be eggs in some nests in early April; the first hatchlings will arrive over the next few weeks. As the hen incubates her eggs, often at the edge of a path, the male remains his nasty self to his mate and often to passers-by. We carry tripods not just to steady cameras.



The first buds burst, most obvious on the wild roses and early-blooming trees, though full leafing-out is over a month away. The haze of color is welcome, especially as it becomes more intense throughout April.



Egrets and great blue herons have been here for a while; on a rare occasion a great blue has even over-wintered. They are sometimes lost in the cold morning mists, or found sitting on tuffets when the water is too deep for wading. Fishing will resume when the water levels allow it.



Seldom seen in the past, turkeys (like deer) have become more common recently. The toms impress in full display. We appreciate the effort but from a distance. It is mating season.



An immature bachelor mute swan has dropped in, finding poor hospitality from the resident cob. It should not have been surprised. After a week or so of harrassment the bird has finally retired to the solitude of Phair's Pond.

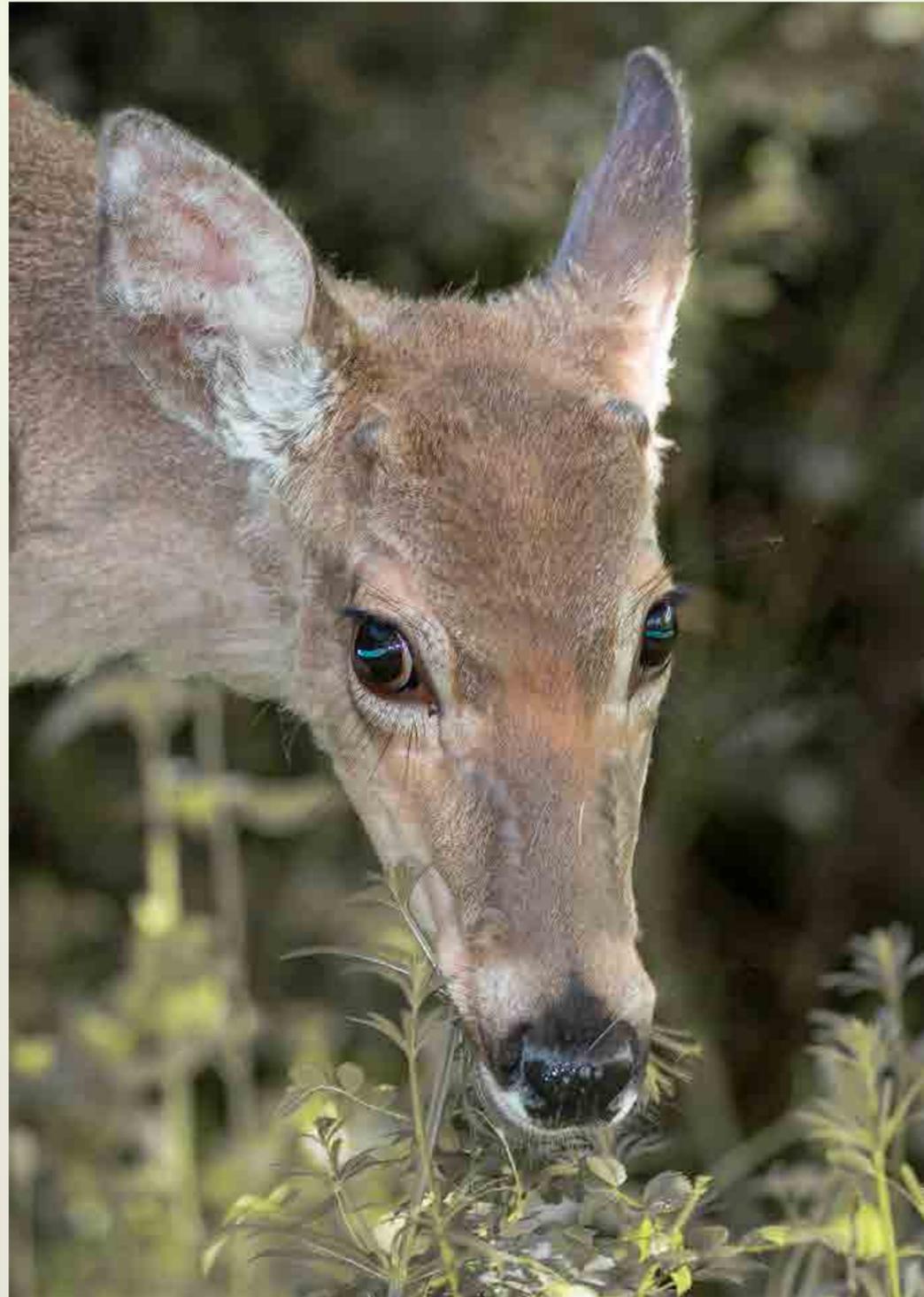
It is a rare year when an *American bittern* allows more than a glimpse of itself, and now we are fortunate that it has appeared for over a week. A bit farther into the reeds and the bird is invisible.



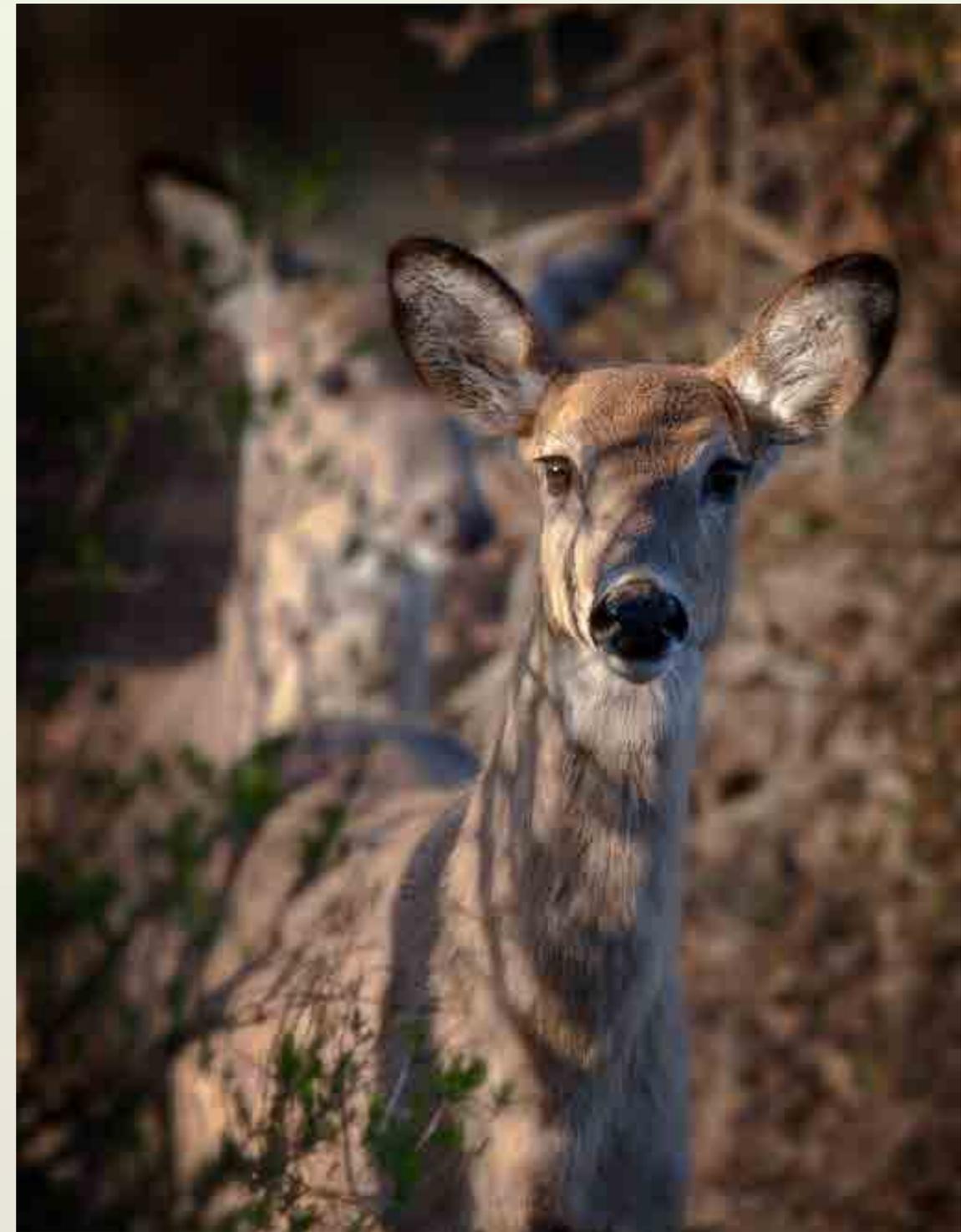
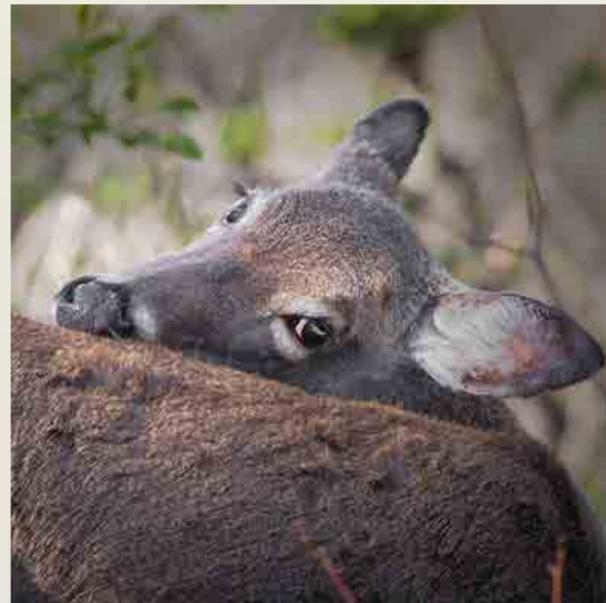


Tree swallows are exploring nesting sites, only allowing us a photograph when they rest for a few seconds. It is still early for egg laying, but they will soon be collecting building bits. Elsewhere on the pond a visiting coot explores near the banks. It will stay only a few days.





Weather alternates between sunny promise and winter dreariness, even well into April, but each day brings a greener aspect to the paths. We visit earlier in the mornings now and find deer before other visitors arrive. Even having become accustomed to spectators in recent years, they still remain cautious while they become more accessible, as curious about us as we are about them. But too many have moved in and the understory suffers. Bambi is now a pest.



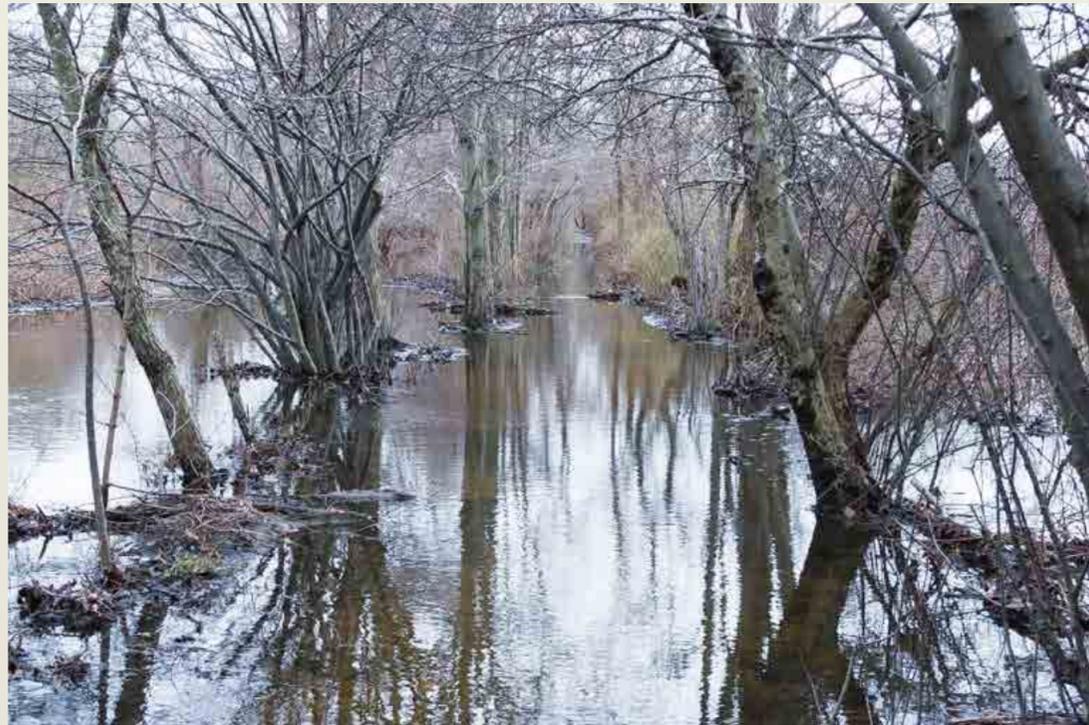
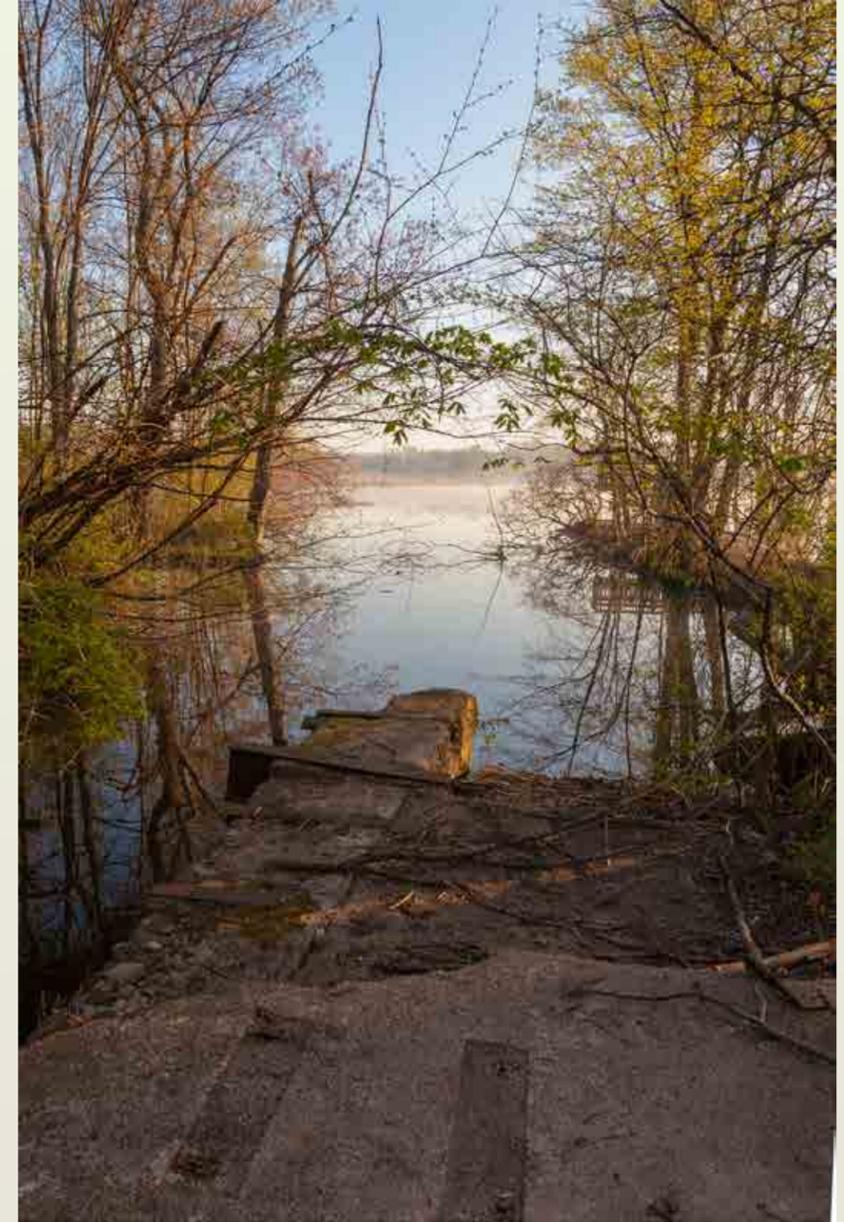
Two weeks of work and the swans have finished the large and sturdy nest. She settles in to incubate her eggs for the next month or so. Now the cob begins his solo wandering of the channels and pond, frequently hidden from view unless visiting the nest. The geese should give both him and the nest a wide berth.

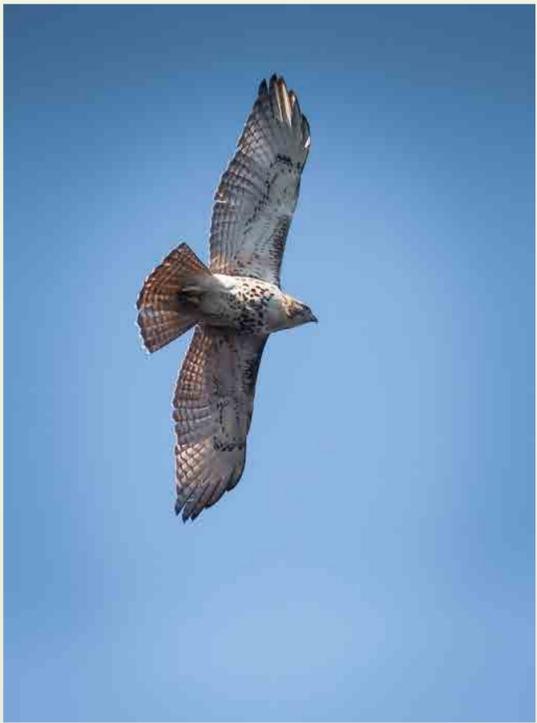


Days of rain can again overwhelm the brook and pond. It may happen in any season, and more frequently in recent years as runoff increases. It has rained a lot this season. Water covers the paths; we need waders to visit. In a spring like this there will be fewer goose chicks to photograph. We wonder how nests survive at all. Evolution appears to have granted foresight only to the swans.



Green builds at the Preserve. We hope the pace slows before the warblers arrive in force. There is little enough chance to photograph them before spring cover troubles our shooting and watching.





Heron, egret, bittern, snipe, and swan have upstaged the little birds, but they are delightful now in breeding plumage. We are grateful for the bare trees.



The raptors still enjoy some unobstructed hunting. After full leafing-out the dense canopy will help shield a potential lunch.





As unlikely as it seems, we catch a mink in the water at the Warden's Watch. A captured snake is dragged to the den, this year just over the bridge at the path to the platform.



We have watched the geese and swan incubating for a while, well before many other birds begin to gather nesting material and mate. Swallows are predictably quick about it. The mallards' rituals are fun to watch, her reluctance finally overcome by the drake's perseverance. Hens will retire to their well-hidden nests and won't be seen before they lead the chicks into the pond.

Some nests will be sophisticated structures, others less so. Doves give relatively thought to details. A rose-breasted grosbeak had begun assembling sticks above the trail, a poor attempt soon abandoned. Flickers, red-bellies and downies, exploring and drilling since March, will have made or found suitable holes by now.



As the water warms the snapping turtles become active. Mating or grappling all seems the same to us. We see snappers every day--many huge--but they seldom pose well for the photographer. They will be a hazard when the chicks arrive, and adults, even swans, are always fair game, too. In times of low water they will seem to be everywhere.





In most years, early May brings more than a haze to the trees. Erupting greenery everywhere tempts the muskrat and rabbits out of hiding for an early breakfast. It has been a difficult winter for the rodents.



Skunk cabbage slowly unfurls to near maturity. Garlic mustard, soon to be knee high, begins its invasion everywhere. If there is a bright side for the Preserve, the deer like it and it's surprisingly good in a [salad](#). Sharp eyes might spot a Jack-in-the-pulpit in the dead zone; others won't even notice the poison ivy leafing out all around.



Early in the morning a stealthy visitor may come upon black-crowned night herons fishing or roosting in a tree. Little green herons fish from the shore, dig for frogs, and screech in the air. They are building a nest over the brook; construction looks insubstantial, but sturdy enough. They will be available all through the summer as reliable subjects. We need only to listen for the screeching.



IS IT A POND OR A LAKE?

New Englanders often say that if sunlight reaches the bottom to affect rooted plant life, it's a pond. Or, depending on which geezer you argue with, it's a pond if you can wade across without drowning. We in New Jersey seem to be less particular with limnological semantics, since we have "Lake Appert" which probably has an average depth of four or five feet. Shouldn't we call it a pond?.....well, perhaps not.

We just don't know if rooted plant life is affected by sunlight here—the water is too turbid to see the bottom. But there isn't much (any?) rooted plant

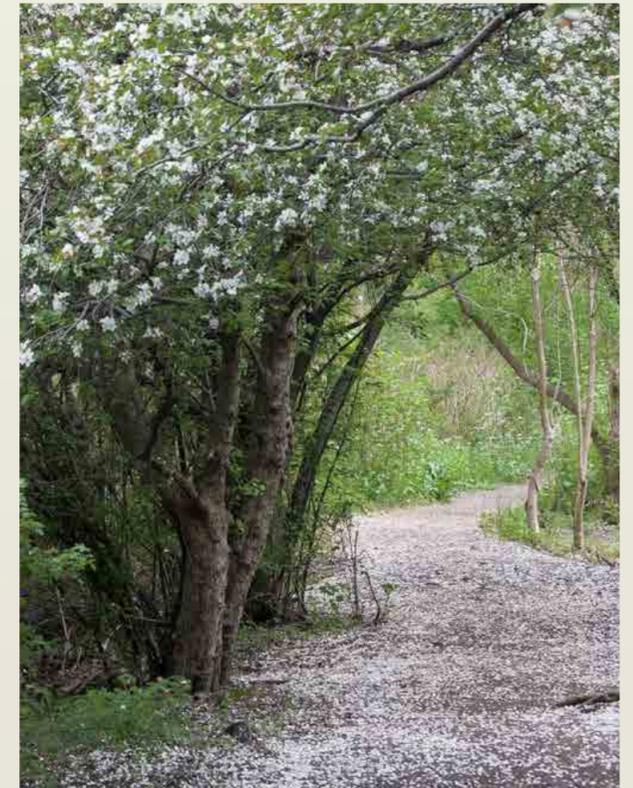
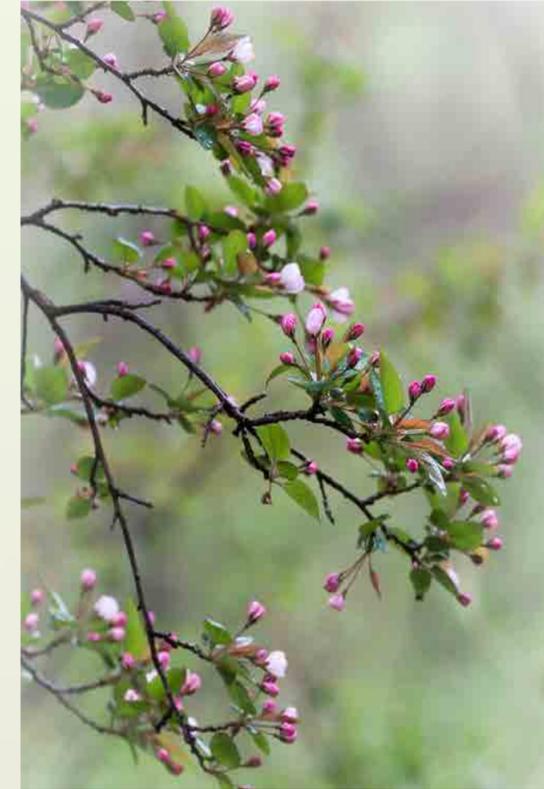
life near the shore, so it's reasonable to expect it to be true overall and it really is a lake. We do know the depth is shallow, so it's wadeable, right? Must be a pond. There is little first hand information to go on, but rumor has it that at least one wader has almost come to grief in the attempt. As we used to say of the Charles River basin in Boston, maybe it has no bottom; just gets denser as you go down. If one wishes to call Lake Appert a pond, probably few will object, but perhaps one should set aside some time if arguing the point with a Vermonter.



April over, most of the warblers we will find have arrived with the blossoms. Yellow-rumps, already here, are joined by palms, yellows, black-and-whites, pines, black-and-greens, black-throated blues, and still others perhaps beyond our skill to identify or find to photograph.



Sharp pinks of new buds give way to bright white crabapple blossoms. They will illuminate Warbler Alley, but for too short a time. In a week the white petals will carpet the path. From now on the foliage will hinder our views, and phrags and cattails will make us feel confined.





We like to find common yellowthroats bouncing in the brush or just above the path; their calls give them away and they pose for just moments.

We see yellows, goldfinches and waxwings more reliably now, south of the Butterfly Garden. Yellow-rumps are everywhere. Goldfinches favor the cattail marsh, and the openness there favors us.



Very early in May the first chicks are out and about with the hens. We keep our distance, but long lenses get us close. We are charmed, even by the goose chicks—in a month they will be ungainly and, charitably, less photogenic. The families' droppings will be a nuisance until flight feathers mature.



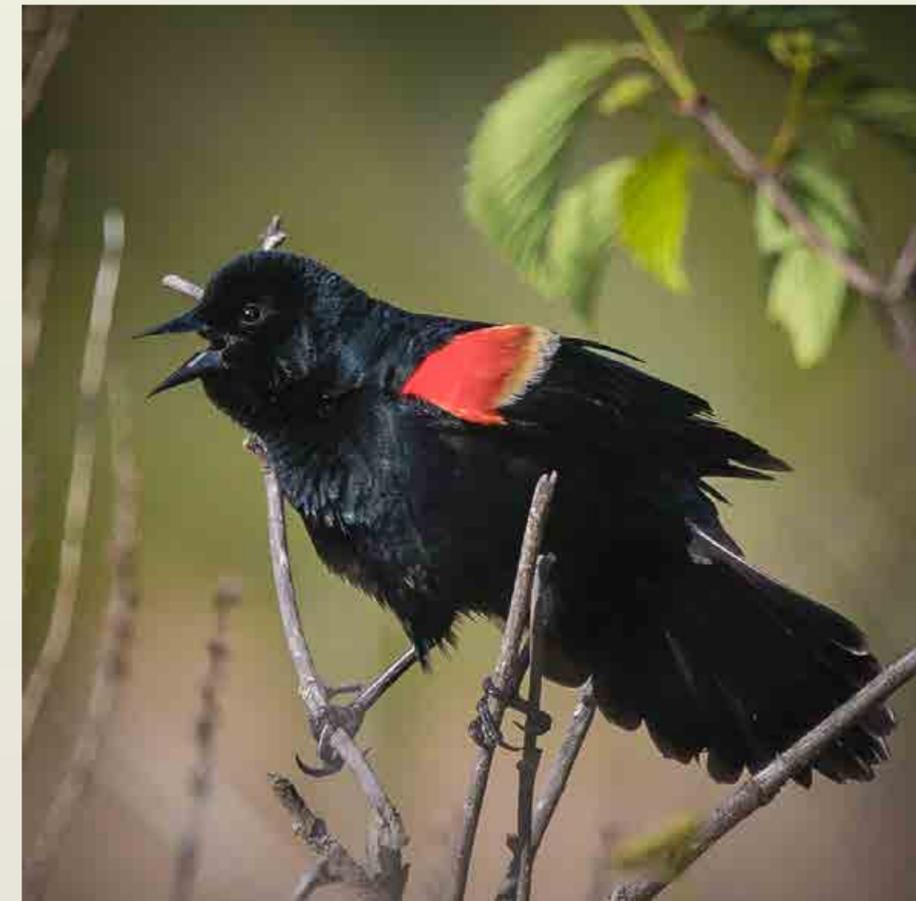
Not every goose egg will hatch; our thanks go to the raccoon. The new mallard young remain irresistible. Chicks of all sorts will be everywhere soon, especially after the first wood duck nestlings drop into the water.



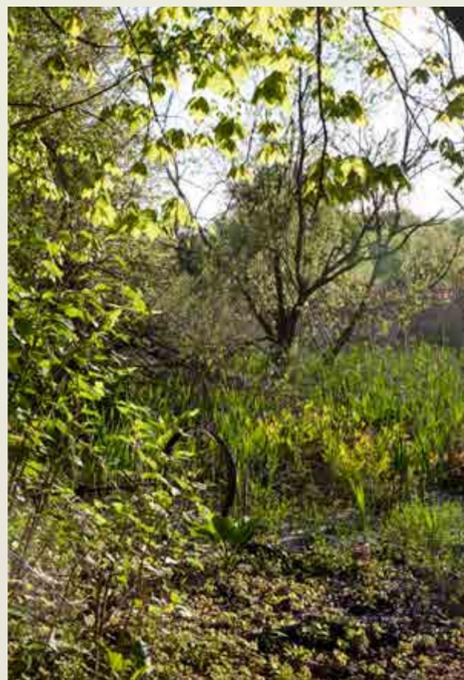
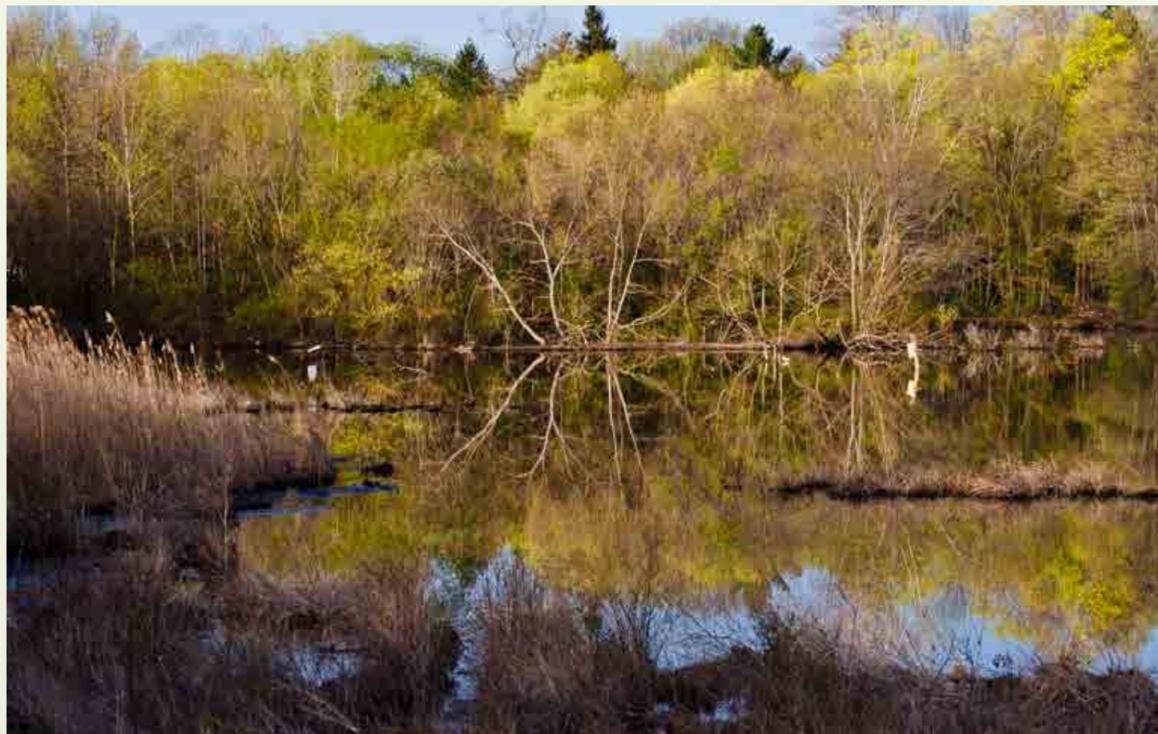
Occasionally, if the resident cob is otherwise occupied, bachelor swans may drop in for a short rest. They will not stay long.



For the present, goose chicks stay close to their parents. The mallard hen, making do with less paternal help, allows a freer rein. We may even find her asleep near the path, some chicks huddling and others wandering about. Different ducks visit often—ruddies, shovelers, teals—but it seems they seldom nest here.



Greenery is everywhere now, though full leafing-out is still nearly a month away. Maples go first; the oaks will be last. Closer to the ground, milkweed and skunk cabbage reach well over a foot high, and phragmites have begun their astonishing growth spurt. Even on overcast mornings the early, still-varicolored foliage is lovely. Too soon the Preserve will slip into summer mode, the deep green monochrome evolving from the delicate palette of spring. We watch the progress all through May.

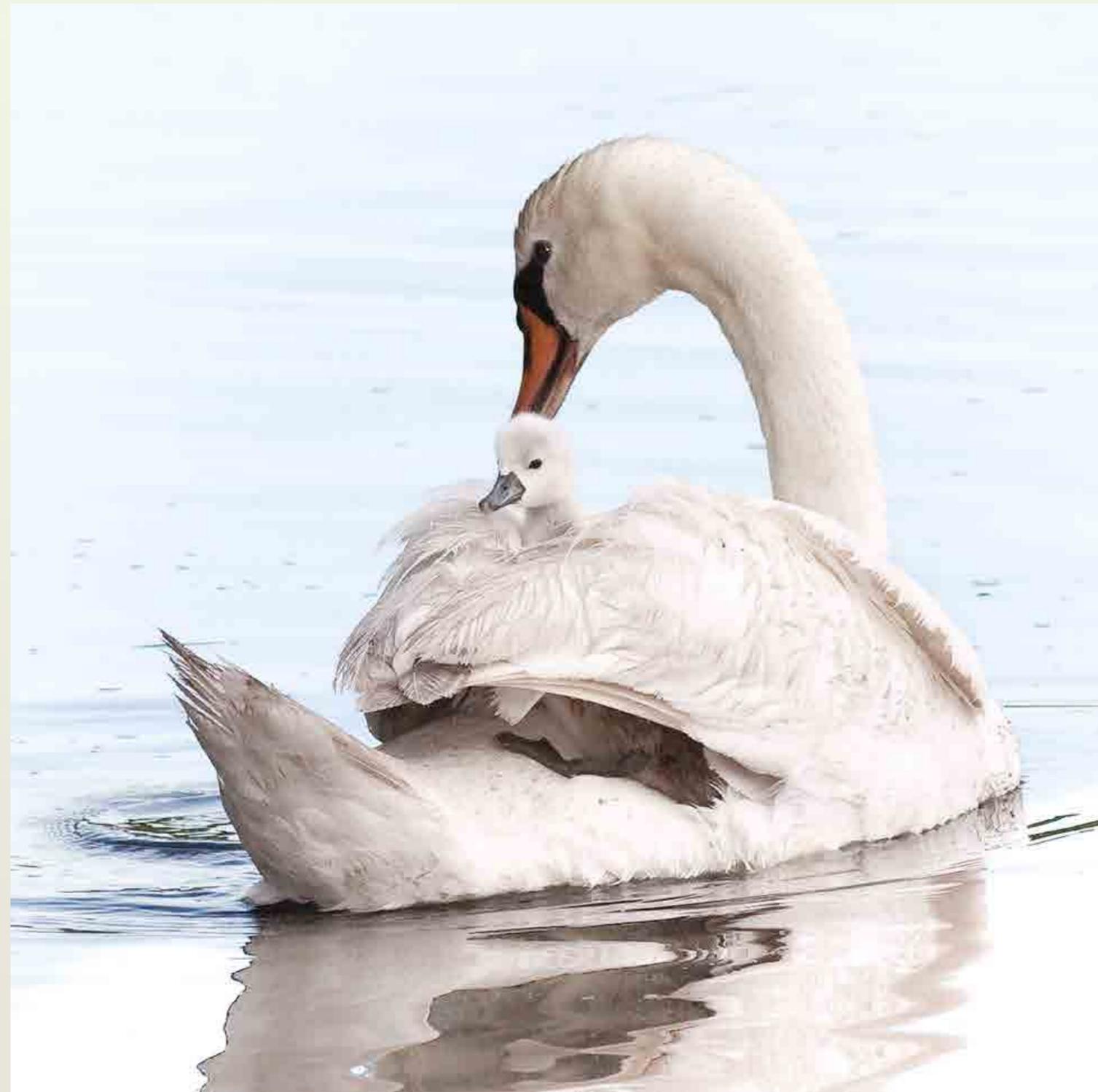


Rarely—very, very, rarely—an owl will show itself to us in daylight. This year we have found two, and on the same day! We can still find birds to shoot through the thickening greenery, but it gets increasingly difficult.



In mid-May, swans take center stage. The cygnets emerge from beneath the pen one by one as they hatch. In two days they are all in the water and swimming with the family. We will watch their numbers fall to the turtles all through the summer, but for now we are delighted. They have abandoned the nest and a single unhatched egg. The dry mound may serve for a goose nest next year; the swans will build elsewhere.





Turtles on the march search to find places to deposit eggs. They become hazards on Franklin Turnpike. We find them in the paths, the brook, near the butterfly garden, even mounting a mound of wood chips. The raccoons will find many of the egg caches; their enterprise is appreciated.



The red chestnut at the Wildflower Garden has blossomed. Stand still there for just ten minutes on a May morning—a hummingbird is guaranteed to return. Set your watch.



Other small birds are increasingly on display as the weather has warmed. By now, most of those that are just passing through, or perhaps will even stay a while or nest, have arrived and made themselves known.



We have read of the wood duck's peculiar nesting behavior, with hens often dumping some of their eggs into already-occupied nests. They may rarely remove damaged eggs and carry them off; we have had the luck to see it. In May all the hens have finally settled in and young begin to arrive by June. In a good year some are nearly always on the pond. Broods can be large, often a dozen or more chicks. Like the mallards they enjoy a longer leash than the goslings, learning on their own how to deal with turtles. Drakes, in the opinion of some the most attractive species to visit, have been losing breeding plumage slowly. Some molt to an embarrassing, forlorn, and derelict appearance in the process.



Canada goose young begin their awkward stage, and the predicted nuisance has materialized. Leave open footwear at home.

The Preserve fills with foliage, but has not quite approached its summer aspect. Phrags are head-high and egrets contrast with the darkening leaves, reflected in the lake.





Mid-May brings tent caterpillars, and with them the cuckoos. Since they are difficult (for me) to find and photograph, please be content with an interested yellow warbler near the culvert. We applaud the small birds for the insect control but dragonflies are collateral damage.



From the Butterfly Garden to Kickypoo Corner, wild mustard lights up the cattail fields. Blooms will last all month, and we can find different varieties in every sunny corner of the Preserve.



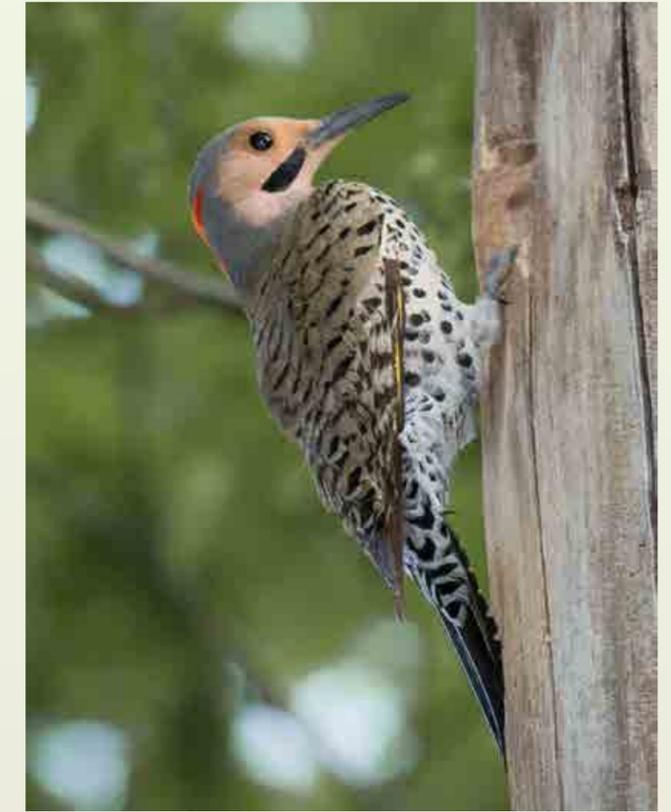
The original angry bird, a ruby-throat has rested for just a few moments, enough for a quick shot.



The weather brings more insects to annoy us. Our attention turns to spiders, their webs backlit in the morning sun or catching early dew. The orchard spiders—orb weavers—prefer the path from the parking lot. They make tiny but colorful, easily-shot stationary subjects.

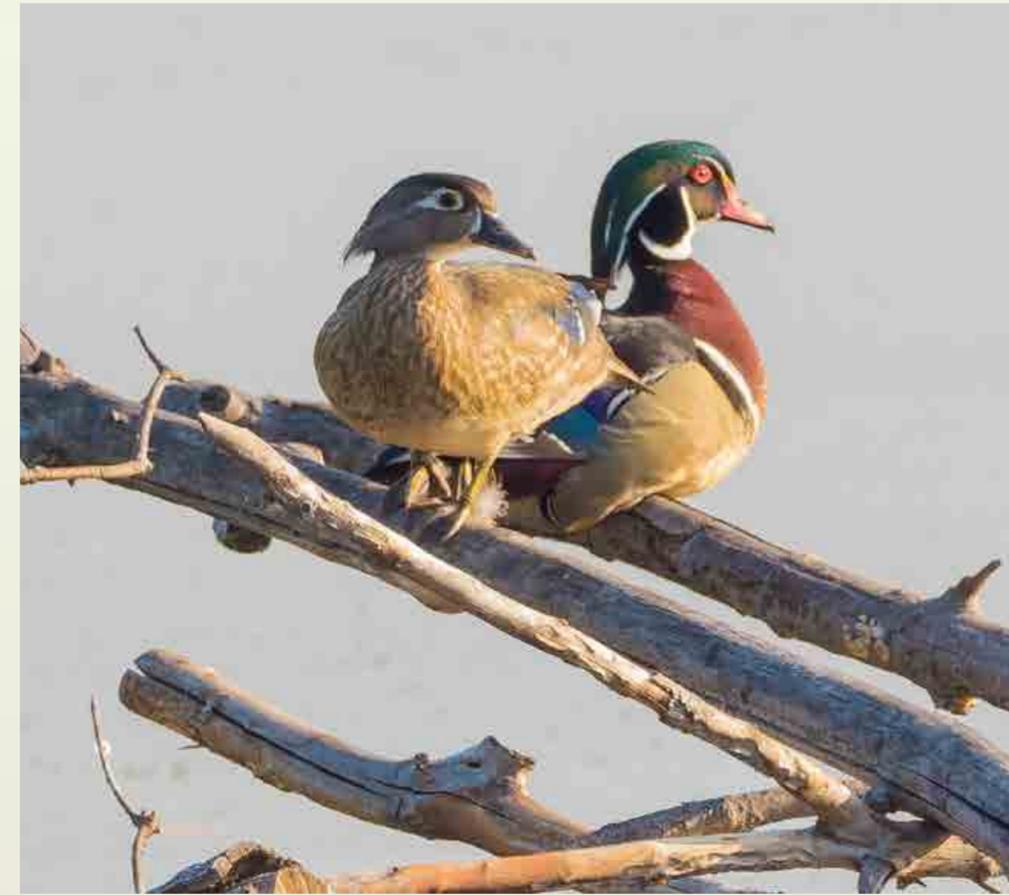


We watch a flicker feeding its young which are rapidly outgrowing their nest in a snag. They will be able to leave soon and the normally easy-to-spook adults will again be hard to find. The cygnets remain close to their parents, cruising the pond and playing. Like the geese, they will have reached the awkward stage in late spring, those that remain. Perhaps one or two will survive to leave in the fall. It has happened, but just once.





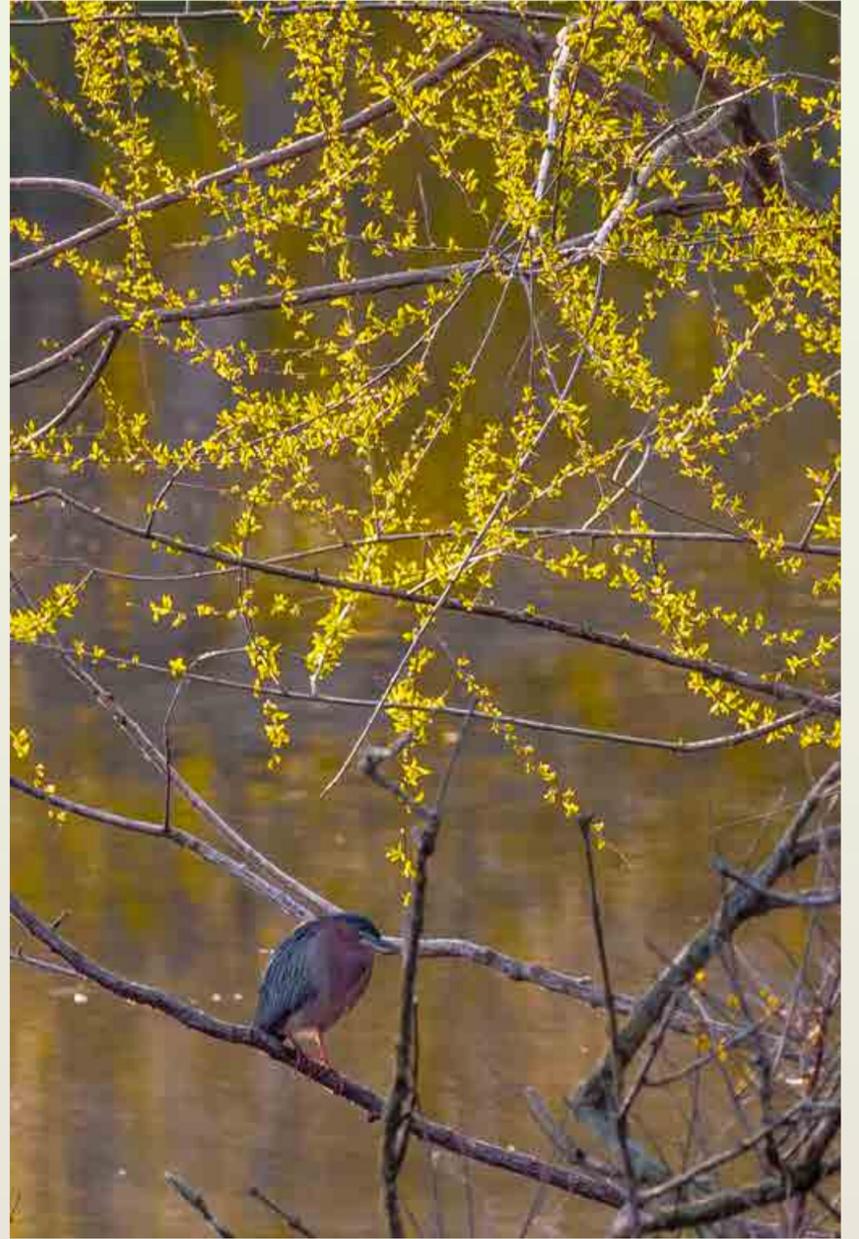
Rain near the end of May has soaked Warbler Alley. The puddles will be gone in a day or so, but mud will persist longer. Trails are rutted with surface roots from trees intolerant of the soil fully saturated just a bit below the surface. We watch our step.



Early on a tranquil morning we notice a little green lurking off shore. A pair of wood ducks, late in deciding on a nest, have roosted on the woodpile for hours, all within sight of others' broods.

Near the red chestnut some meadow hawkweed blooms, more yellow to brighten a dim corner. There are fewer flowers now, but honeysuckle, multiflora roses and silky dogwood take up the banner. But these, too, begin to fade in the week before the solstice.





Without the swallows, what would the bugs be like? They allow only an occasional lucky shot as they dart past.



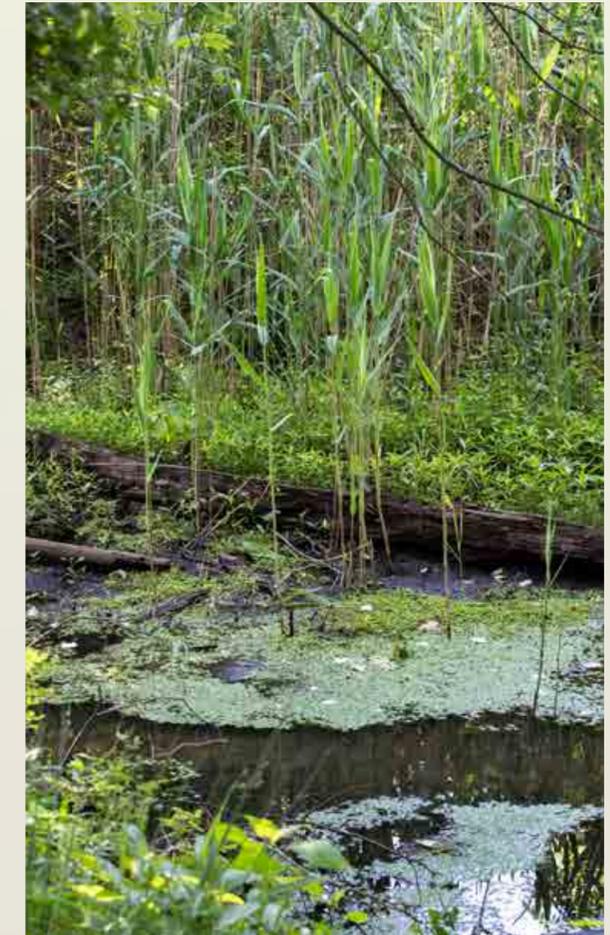
As the water warms, duckweed and marsh pennywort spread into the pond. In some summers duckweed may eventually leave just a third of the lake clear, but for now ospreys are free to fish in open water, if they brave the red-wings. Tadpoles have transformed and frogs can be found on any visit. We have been listening to peepers for quite a while.





Early on a June morning a wary black-crown stands in the duckweed near the start of Warbler Alley, probably hunting for bullfrogs. Only our longest lens lets us get close enough for a shot before he bolts.

Phrags! *Phragmites australis*--exotic, invasive, relentless. The shoots that pierced the ground like daggers just weeks ago were head high by mid-May. Now at over eight feet they are on schedule to reach twelve or fifteen in July. The stand was hacked back last year near the Scout platform, but new shoots have already reclaimed over a foot of the trail and are still advancing. Phrags have reached Warbler Alley and the walkway in the Dead Zone. They obscure the view at Pirie-Mayhood, are sprouting in the brook, and in the channel to the culvert. Other invasives like garlic mustard, multiflora rose, porcelainberry and others are also a difficult problem, and so far only purple loosestrife has been beaten back. With a huge effort, these others might be controlled, but the invincible phrags are likely the future of the shores of Lake Appert and of the cattail marsh.

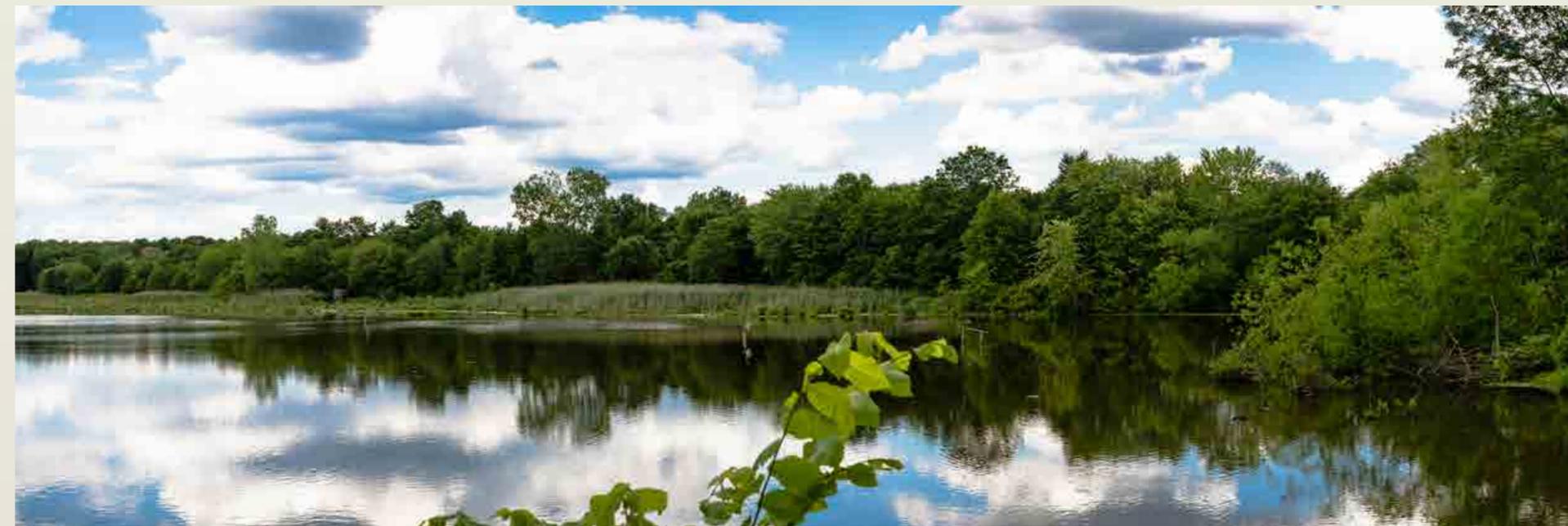


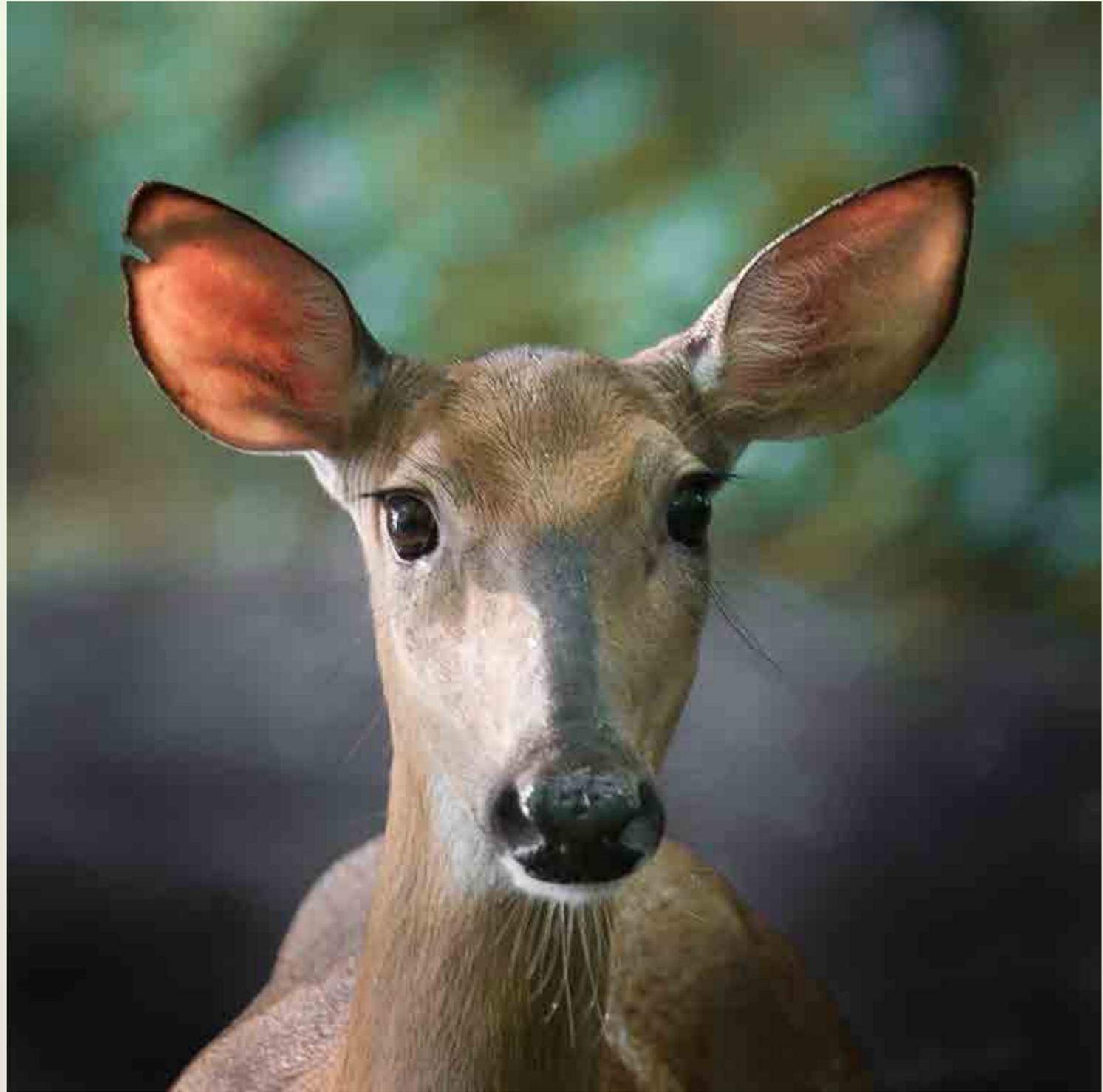


Now it is late in June. The coming of summer is not just theoretical. We feel it even well before the solstice. Paths narrow. Summer skies, humidity, occasional heat, and the approach to uniform color all signify the end of spring. Dragonflies and swallows zip over the now-turbid pond and we bare our arms in morning visits.

The Preserve relaxes into the new season. The stress of mating and protecting young is almost over as the season matures with the chicks. The young may still call to be fed, but the intervals will lengthen as they learn independence. Seasons evolve, not change at once. It was summer-like before and in some ways will be spring-like after the end of June, but renewal is just about complete.

The solstice is not a boundary, but a convenient place to end this volume. Summer has arrived.







A CELERY FARM VISIT

(adapted from the *WINTER* volume)

Should you wish to drop by, aim northwest from New York City to Allendale, not quite 25 miles away. Follow Franklin Turnpike north past Allendale Avenue and Cottage Place, and look for a small dirt parking area on the right. If it's not a weekend morning, you can find a space easily. Stop at the kiosk to read about daily wildlife sightings and look at the lost-and-found stuff. Check the notices for the rules and grab a bird checklist if the box isn't empty. Now walk across a plank bridge and head down the path. You are starting on a trail around Lake Appert; it's just a low spot fed by some

little streams, and large stretches are shallow enough for herons to stand in. You will be back at the kiosk in about a mile. There are detours to Blue Heron Pond to the east and Phair's Pond at the north end that will add maybe another half-mile. So distance is no barrier to access for nearly anyone. Find a handy map if you click this link to the [Fyke](#) site for reference. In the recent past, the place was indeed a farm, and what is now Lake Appert were fields which could be irrigated easily. Sometimes too easily, by reputable account, and to this day the preserve is occasionally flooded. In summer, even in dry spells, one can find patches of damp earth or even mud here and there along the trails as water seeps up through the peaty soil. In the spring and fall, mud

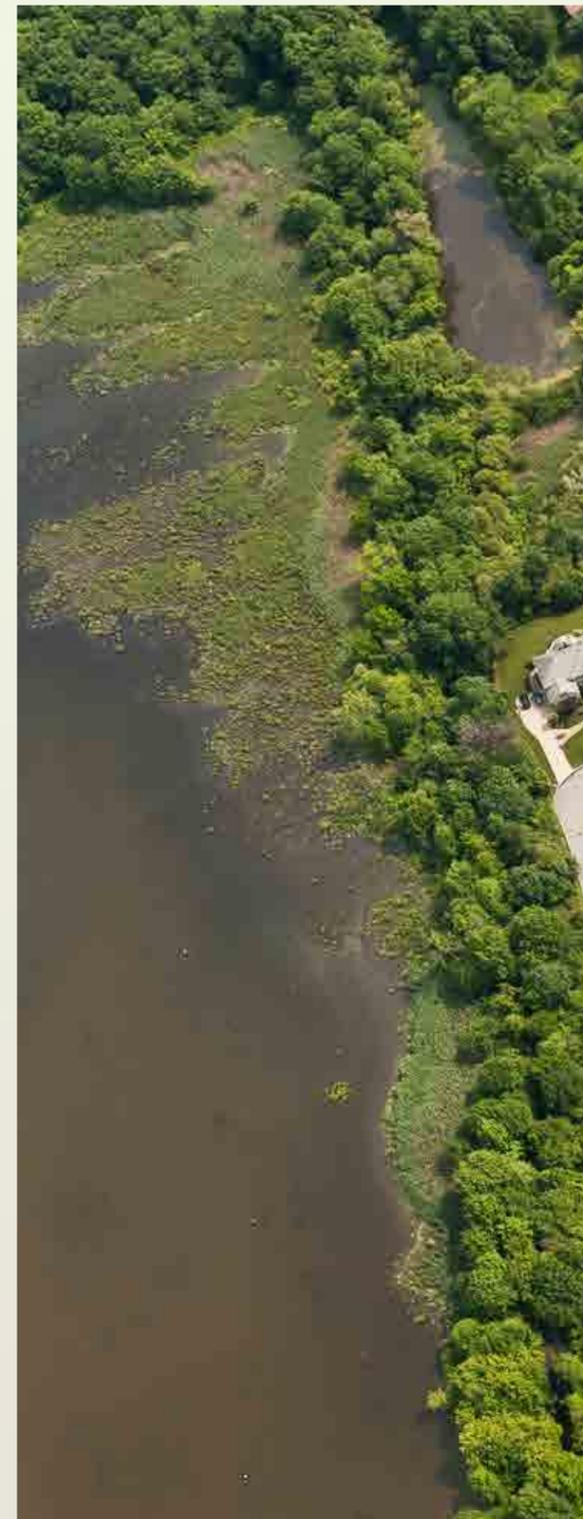


is a given. And in winter, paths are crusted over with ice or with half-melted slush and, of course, there is mud during a thaw. Recent attempt to civilize the paths with wood chips seem to me doomed as the wood appears to break down and decompose at about the same rate as it can be spread. And the chips break down to mud. Hope you have appropriate footwear.

We can take both broader and closer looks from the air. Taking a long view, we see that the Celery Farm is indeed in suburbia. We are looking west. The shopping center far left sits alongside the old Erie mainline, Crestwood Park and its swimming area are at the top, and we find condos and industrial/office buildings at the lower right.



Aerial view of the Celery Farm in the summer of 2011, looking NNE above Franklin Turnpike. Phair's pond is at the top, Blue Heron pond is at right.



At the far left find a view similar to that on the Fyke map; you can relate many of the features listed to the aerial view. Coming closer, find the Allendale Brook, and the path that runs alongside, hidden but showing up as a thin line through the trees near the eastern shore. The Pirie-Mayhood Platform is also hidden in the trees near the end of the driveway outside the preserve, and Blue Heron Pond is at the top. This was a summer flight during a period of relatively low water, conditions anticipated by regulars eager to find shore birds. On the following page, we have a view of the western side of the pond showing the channel to the culvert and the muddy shore, split repeatedly by water intrusion. The circle near the top identifies a lone walker headed for Barking Dog Corner, bound to the path by phragmites on his left that may be eight feet tall and by a field of cattails on his right; the other circle surrounds an egret fishing (trust me), well out of range and view of photographers. The phrags in the bulk of the view are greener than the rest at this time of year in the wetter depressions, the remains of the old irrigation channels.



Shore of Lake Appert looking WNW. No Name Culvert is at the right, at the end of the obvious channel.



But back to the tour. Walk a bit down the trail from the kiosk and cross a bridge over the little weir. This outlet from Lake Appert feeds into a little stream that joins the Allendale brook a few dozen yards to the south. You can now choose to go left or right. Left brings you out on a point with a viewing platform, the Warden's Watch; the panorama at the start of this section is what you will see. It's a favorite with photographers on weekend mornings, at least in years when there's enough to shoot. These are often just social occasions, since photo opportunities are seasonal and episodic.

In warmer weather, especially early in the morning, you may have to muscle your way past the half-sleeping Canada geese (another reason not to wear sandals) to reach the platform. Sometimes, in the spring, one will be happy to have carried a tripod or umbrella to ward off a nest guard. There may be an egret on the brush pile thirty yards away, phoebes on the point to the left, warblers in trees behind, fish jumping, some wood ducks, snapping turtle

snouts sticking above the water, and swallows working to keep the bugs under control. If you're lucky, a black-crowned night heron will be feeding off to the right. A great blue heron or two will be standing in the water, and there will usually be some ducks. Swans, immature or bachelors, sometimes show up for a day or two, but single pairs have stayed and nested successfully for each of the past several years.

Retrace your steps and continue around the bottom of the pond to reach the Holly Grove, which, depending on how recently it has been tended, may provide a nice view of the hollies above some blooms, often garlic mustard in flower. This attractive nuisance seems to have an unbreakable hold on the Preserve, and can be found everywhere. It is tasty, and there are pesto and salad [recipes](#) using it. Just ahead turn north along the Allendale Brook to find "Warbler Alley" and the Pirie-Maybood Platform, scene of Sunday morning's Hour-On-The-Tower where a group of serious birders gather for a weekly count.



The Holly Grove



Along the brook toward the Pirie platform



Early summer view from the Pirie-Maybood Platform



Looking south from the Scout platform in early fall

Early in the morning the light is nice here for photography, and changes in vegetation with the seasons give different opportunities. Spring is best; the exuberant growth of summer hasn't clogged up the view, and snipe and bitterns may show themselves to (extremely) lucky observers.

Continuing north, reach a fork. To the right, see Brotherton Bridge across the brook that will take you to Blue Heron Pond. The path there is tight and less frequently used, but if you are stealthy you may be rewarded. Long pants give at least some security against ticks. Make a noise and the egrets and herons will bolt. Back on the main path, the trail roughly traces the outline of the pond. At another fork the right road leads to a path going to the northern-most part of the reserve, all woodland where great horned owls have been reported, and to Phair's Pond and the Greenway entrance. A garden of native grasses sits in this open area and a red chestnut tree stands alone, becoming a hummingbird magnet when it blooms in early May.

Coming back from Phair's to the main path, bear right at the NO SKATING sign to Pink Potty Bridge (a toilet was dragged out here during a clean-up some years ago) and the Troop 59 (Scout) Platform, both at the north end of the Lake. The Warden's Watch is visible across the pond less than half a mile away. Cattails will obstruct the view from the bridge in summer. In about a hundred yards along the path flanked by stands of phragmites and grasses you reach the Butterfly Garden, the only cultivated patch in the preserve. An ancient tractor rusts quietly nearby, and harrow parts and bits of a plow are visible when the brush is down, all remnants of the old farm. The path to the south is open and pleasant. Goldfinches in late summer and cedar waxwings in fall are common, and it's a good place to find yellow warblers. They sometimes nest here. A buried culvert connects a ditch to the pond and the marshy area to the right. There may be muskrat in the water, or a snapper covered with duckweed, or, far less commonly, a Virginia rail—at least in seasons when vegetation hasn't obscured the channel. A loud splash from some surprised creature may surprise you as well. Neither of you will be any wiser about the other.



Toward the Butterfly Garden, late summer



The rest of the path provides more exercise than wildlife viewing, but the expert birders may do well here. It bends west to Barking Dog corner, where a happy golden retriever used to announce himself to everyone on the path, then south into and along the Dead Zone where very little seems to show itself. In spring, though, you may be lucky enough to find a Jack-in-the pulpit. Now we're back at the kiosk. Lots of choices. Go home for hot coffee (good idea in winter), back to the Warden's Watch to see if anything or anyone flew in that we've missed, put on running shoes and do a couple more laps (not for me, thanks). Maybe drive to the Greenway entrance for another look at Phair's. Or just plan to come back later in the day.

You may have been surprised that you were alone most of the time. On winter mornings, in fact, you may be the only one in the preserve. But late afternoons, spring through fall, can bring teenage track runners, little kids jammed into strollers or on the loose, walkers, joggers, whole families, and who knows what. It's a frustrating time to look for wildlife, and best avoided anyway. Weekends after 9 AM also qualify. Weekday mornings, early, are my favor-

ite times for both solitude and photography.

Even long-time visitors seldom conceptualize how little of the Celery Farm we can actually see, never mind photograph. The limited vistas and rigid trail structure restrict us to just a fraction of the Preserve. Access to the water seems to shrink every year. The paths are often physically confining and seem to become narrower each summer; tall grasses, phragmites, and cattails obstruct our views more than ever. It's been while since the Duck Observatory was anything like an observatory, for example; it is now a wall of phrags. Rightly, informal trails to water's edge have been roped off to discourage random trampling, and we do need to remember, often grudgingly, that it is not a park. We still have the three viewing platforms and the Norman and Pena benches available for pond viewing; nature will do what it will do and we have to accept what we can get.

The limitations for photographers are sometimes frustrating, though. Sight lines into habitats across the pond are cut off by the remnants of cultivation, and by the growth of phragmites and trees, especially irksome around Pirie-Mayhood. Views of the pond from near the Scout platform are shrinking every

year, making photography more and more challenging. Birders may be satisfied with seeing a specimen behind foliage, or even only hearing it, but a decent photograph requires some degree of proximity and freedom from

This book is about seasonal changes, but these aren't the only changes altering the landscape; the Celery Farm is not a static environment. Evidence of former cultivation has been fading since the 1960s and will be almost unrecognizable in a few more decades. Flooding, new growth, decay, climate variations, and other natural processes may also alter the landscape from year to year. It's quite possible that the lake will silt up and be forgotten in a century or so, filled completely with cattails and phragmites. The aerial photographs here taken about 15 years apart show how the Big Ditch is widening, the beds in the Bajor section of the old farm are disappearing, tuffets in the lake are shrinking, and phrags coverage has expanded, just as examples. Had the recent aerial shots been taken during a wetter season the differences would be even more marked. Purple loosestrife, in much



Above, aerial view in the mid-1990's. Courtesy of Jerry Barrack

of the landscape in the early image, had become even more widespread before being fully controlled a few years ago by the introduction of predatory beetles. It has reappeared, though it will no doubt fade again as the bugs multiply in response. There have been noticeable changes just since work on this book began. You can view an intermediate Google Earth satellite image on the Web, probably from about 2005.

The present color of the water draws one's attention. Shallower areas near the shoreline are bluish-gray while the deeper parts are brown and turbid. Even at the shore one can satisfy oneself about the lack of water clarity just by putting a stick into it. There are few or no aquatic plants and reeds in the water along the shore; things like marsh pennywort and duckweed do flourish, but both extend above water

and have all the light they can use. All these symptoms point to the pond being, technically, hypereutrophic—literally, excessively well-nourished—likely attributable to nutrient-rich runoff into the pond, and through a chain of events this leads to low dissolved oxygen content and limited diversity of plants and fish.

Because of the turbidity there may not be enough sunlight to encourage plant growth at the bottom which would generate oxygen, even though the pond is very shallow. The algae will, but decomposition of dead algae masses often uses more than is produced. Why is Lake Appert so murky? Without analyses for total chlorophyll and dissolved oxygen we have no firm answer, but algae, in all likelihood, are the main contributor. From the air, one may see swimming geese leaving trails in the water behind them in summer. Well-documented experiences in Minnesota and elsewhere suggest that carp are commonly at least partially responsible, by churning the bottom and pushing sediment into the water column. Snapping turtles may add to that. There are plenty of carp and plenty of snappers, and some very large specimens of each in the lake.

Often, carp can be seen “piping” at the surface, coating their gills with oxygen—a behavior often noted in shallow, low oxygen, hypereutrophic lakes. There have been fish kills here in the recent past, as well.



Carp are especially tolerant of these conditions, but not all species are able to cope and even carp will sometimes need to pipe. It’s possible that these changes have led to what every photographer will agree upon: that there are far fewer wading birds, cormorants, and osprey dives than there were just a few years ago. It is unlikely that this book could have been prepared if the photographic work were just starting. That isn’t to say that there are no opportunities now, but they are rarer than in the past.

So that’s a tour of this small world, what you would see on your first visit. It is more than just a path around a pond, as will learn as you sharpen your eye on later visits, and everyone who gets to know it will, of course, see it differently. To learn what others think, and keep current with sightings and news, you may wish check www.celeryfarm.net often, and perhaps join or contribute to the Fyke Nature Association.

After this rather long-winded introduction, if potential photographic frustration hasn’t deterred you, come and visit. Bring your camera anyway. At the very least, you can count on a walk in a quiet place, but always with the chance of finding something to shoot. And you might find helpful the notes on photographing there, while notes on the photographs follow that. If you haven’t noticed so far, web links are active and shown in blue.



Left, Morning view of Lake Appert from the Warden’s Watch, _____

PHOTOGRAPHING AT THE CELERY FARM

The Celery Farm is far from a paradise for photographers. Those who have photographed wildlife in, say, Florida or Central America or just about anywhere else will be asking where everything went. I've asked the same question myself, and often—particularly in recent years. Many local nature photographers shun the place for that reason. Some years are better; recent ones have been dreadful, and many experienced shooters that used to visit no longer come to photograph or socialize. A struggle for tri-



pod space at the Warden's Watch has become more of a lonely vigil on weekend mornings. We all have our reasons for coming to photograph the Celery Farm or for ignoring it, but I will admit that if the Celery Farm were more than the two miles from my home it would have been difficult over the years to motivate myself to capture the images in this book.

Given the caveats above, you may decide against dragging your gear here. But if you come, do think hard about equipment. Distances here across



open water are pretty large, so for waterfowl, herons and egrets, and birds in flight really long lenses are often necessary (600 mm, if you've got one—and bring a tele-extender); no lens can seem long enough at times. Before you think of investing north of \$10,000 in that kind of gear, think about where else you might use it, consider that even a 600 mm lens is often inadequate at the Celery Farm, and then how frustrating it will be when nothing shows up. Tele-extenders can increase the reach to as much as 1200 mm, equivalent to a 24X spotting scope, but this places extraordinary demands on equipment and technique. You may have to lower your keeper standards if you go in that direction, and miss many birds in flight.

For me, a big lens on an adequate tripod is a disadvantage here, since that burden will normally restrict one to the Warden's Watch or the Pirie Platform; other parts of the preserve are inconvenient to reach carrying such a load. If you're old enough to afford it it's quite possible you may be too old to haul it. It can be done, but experience shows that you will seldom find a long lens away from the first two plat-



forms. In addition, there are few places along the shore accessible to photographers where we might expect to find and shoot wildlife. There are no blinds along the paths. Getting close to an egret away from the Warden's Watch, for example, is rare.

If you don't have a monster lens and the best camera, should you not bother at all? There are still lots of opportunities for landscape shots in any season

and a shorter telephoto like my relatively inexpensive 400 mm will get you many birds and close-in waterfowl. An even shorter lens on an APS-C body may give equivalent magnification. With just about any digital single-lens reflex mounting a short lens, and a small expenditure for extension tubes and a flash, you can do macro work all over the Preserve. Crabapple blossoms, orchard spiders, webs, dragonflies or whatever else you can find can be magnified and photographed in great detail. Many point-and-shoot cameras can do remarkable close-focus work. You may also encounter a deer on the trail, or a row of freshly minted mallard ducklings nearly at your feet. Look for the beetles in the milkweed silk in fall, or



the hummingbird moths, or the jewelweed blossoms, or jumping spiders in holes at the Warden's Watch platform.

If you have a good spotting scope, consider adapting it to accept a point-and-shoot camera. Digi-scoping can produce good results with little extra relative cost. Make sure your tripod is up to it, though; most I've seen supporting scopes are too light for photography at the magnifications involved. More money.

It goes without saying that early morning is best, both for light and for finding creatures, and I have often left home before sunrise to (if lucky) capture pretty light or dramatic skies in landscapes or just watch the geese vacate the place. Try to catch the starling blastoff from the phrags early on mid-autumn mornings. When the joggers arrive the egrets and black-crowns will bolt and there is little chance of spotting a deer or muskrat, but warblers and catbirds don't care much. Late afternoon and evening can be lovely, but avoid Pirie because of the glare off the lake from direct sun and the potential long walk back in the dark if the sun sets, unless you have something specific in mind, of course. Spring, as you might expect, is the most productive season

and summer generally the least, largely because of the heavy foliage and uniform color. Winter in the Preserve, while often dreary, provides lovely grazing light and the chance to see foxes (I should be so lucky) and white-throated sparrows, and foggy landscapes as spring approaches, although without the variety that spring affords. The trail conditions and the cold do discourage visitors. Did I mention I prefer solitude on the paths? Arrive as soon as you can after a snowfall to catch snow in the trees above the paths. Autumn colors, especially viewed from the Warden's Watch, can be spectacular in the morning. But the worst times (read: ugliest) are probably in late fall/early winter, just before the pond begins to freeze and the most of the ducks have vanished along with the leaves. New Jersey lacks the evergreens and white birches that make New England winters at least visually tolerable.

With apologies to experienced shooters, those new to photography might try these suggestions. If you can afford good equipment, great; bring it. But you can get good results with any camera. If you see an opportunity, assuming that it's not a skittish creature and you have the luxury of time to think, stop



and ask yourself what appealed to you and how you might make it more interesting either in-camera or at the computer. Move about, check different angles. Close one eye and re-examine your find; it very well might evaporate as an opportunity when you look at it that way. A blue viewing filter can give a rough idea of how the scene will look in monochrome. Look carefully at the background and think about how you might avoid distractions, whether it should be in focus or blurred, and set the aperture accordingly. Check the viewfinder or LC screen care-

fully to see what you have cut off at the edges or inadvertently included, and control the tilt of the camera to suit your idea. Bracket exposures, especially in high contrast situations, to increase your



keepers (or to blend at the computer). Keep the shutter speed up for flight shots, and learn to pan smoothly. Teach yourself how to handle strong backlighting with exposure compensation and practice

with your pop-up flash for fill. This isn't film—exposures are practically free. You will drive your spouse or companions crazy, but you will get better photographs. Delete the rubbish and backup the rest.

Having said all that about patience, I do suggest some practice in getting off quick exposures because you will not always be able to reflect upon a wildlife opportunity. But still be careful of an itchy trigger finger or you may miss focus. Understand how quickly your autofocus and image stabilization respond under different light, and let the camera settle for a fraction of a second before opening the shutter. At high shutter speeds turn off stabilization; it's not needed and may even ruin a shot. Try back-button focus if your camera supports it, to separate metering and focusing operations from each other. Set anticipated focus distances manually as you walk so the camera will respond more quickly.

Of course, it helps greatly if you understand what your camera settings actually do and how they will affect depth of field, digital noise, autofocus, exposure, and camera shake. A camera won't drive itself. Learn how metering modes work. Invest

some time getting familiar with image enhancement software like Adobe Lightroom, Photoshop, or PS Elements. Pick up a bit at a time, as you need it. Look at good work and think about how you might duplicate the efforts that appeal to you. The difference between a decent image and a very good one is frequently small, and often in the details.

Read about photography—not just in your camera manual (which is always a good idea), but to learn what makes a good photograph and how to improve your technique. Don't let the camera make your aesthetic decisions; avoid JPEG capture and shoot in RAW mode when you acquire the software to handle that, then “develop” your images your-



self and don't settle for what your camera decides are good exposures and colors. Good photography requires commitment, learning, and practice.

If all this seems like a lot to manage, it is, but it isn't necessary to learn everything at once. Modern cameras are not entirely stupid, and if you start in Program or Auto mode you can concentrate on aesthetics and will get decent results quickly. If you take lots of photos you will learn from your mistakes. You will soon realize that those results are getting better, and will be able to decide if the rate of improvement is worth the effort. At the very least, the work will translate into far better family photos.

Lastly, satisfy yourself. It's nice if others appreciate your work, but if you alone are satisfied there need be no other incentive to photograph. Most of us will always be minor leaguers compared to the best nature photographers like Art Wolfe or Frans Lanting, but it is not our livelihood, just one of the things that make us happy.



NOTES ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Most of these photographs are meant to convey the spirit of the place, not planned as exhibition images, but some have in fact been exhibited as prints. The images presented here were processed using Adobe Photoshop in various versions from 4 up to CC, and cataloged in Adobe Lightroom, with only a minimum of adjustment. None has had any feature (or creature) added or removed, nothing was done in processing the raw files that would not have been attempted in traditional darkroom work, and all were taken at the Celery Farm. This is not a natural history book, but a photographic essay, so I felt justified in enhancing many of the images (minimally) to make more engaging photographs.

I normally carry two camera bodies, to avoid lens changes and so minimize missed opportunities. These photographs were taken almost entirely with Canon digital single-lens reflex camera bodies (20D, 5D, 5D Mark III or 1Ds Mark II over the years) with a few lenses at a time from the list of Canon 400mm f/5.6L, 70-300mm f/3.5-f/5.6 DO, 24-105mm

f/4L, 17-40mm f/4L, or a 70-200mm f/2.8L Mark II with or without a 2× extender, and on a few occasions with a borrowed 100-400mm zoom or a 400mm f/4 DO. Recently, my Olympus OMD E-M1 with a 300/f4 + 1.4x extender has provided a full frame “equivalent” of 840mm. Insect and other close-up images were taken largely with a Canon 100mm f/2.8L macro lens or the 400/5.6L, the latter with extension tubes and in most cases with diffused (important!) flash. In dim conditions or to give a catchlight in the eye, one often needs fill flash. I use a flash extender with a Fresnel lens at longer distances—a Better Beamer—on a Canon 550EX flash in high-speed synch mode, dialed back to minimize red-eye or steel-eye and to avoid blowing highlights. I may shlep a tripod for very early morning circuits; it helps image quality at any time of day, but do it grudgingly. Working with a small equipment load encourages frequent visits, the only way to get enough material for a book such as this at the Celery Farm.

To sum up the way I’ve worked: minimal kit, frequent visits, early morning arrival, and an all year schedule.

