Audubon chapter places signs about birds on Susquehanna River Walk

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Williamsport Sun-Gazette 11-15-15

Bird watchers who use the Susquehanna River Walk now can use three interpretive signs to identify the winged species that fly and swim nearby.

The signs, which were developed, in part, by members of the Lycoming chapter of the National Audubon Society, were dedicated Tuesday.

"The whole idea with the river walk is not just about recreation. It's not just about trying to promote healthy lifestyles and livable community. It's also about education," said Mark Murawski, county transportation planner.

One of the first two completed signs is on the north side of the river near the Hepburn Street parking area while the other is across on the south side.

The third sign, which also will be on the south side of the river walk, likely will be placed by spring, depending on weather.

The signs are based around types of birds. They are titled "Ducks and Other Water Birds of the River," "Songbirds and Other Small Birds of Brush and Trees" and "Birds of Prey."

The Lycoming Audubon Society has focused on helping bird populations in the past, most notably helping to reintroduce peregrine falcons to the area.

"There were no peregrine falcons in the state. There were very few on the East Coast. They'd all been killed by the (pesticide) DDT," said Gary Metzger, society president.

Through their efforts, the falcon population started to come back.

"Our chapter reintroduced peregrine falcons to the valley here," Metzger said. "We put hacking towers on top of the Genetti Hotel. We bought birds. We worked with the Game Commission and we got the birds started back here."

Their efforts paid off and, "In 2013, we discovered that there was a pair of peregrine falcons nesting on the Market Street Bridge," Metzger said.

The falcons brought attention to the river walk area.

"It was such a big deal, our birds coming back. We set up spotting scopes, and we were watching these birds day after day. People stopped to see what was going on. A lot of people in the city got excited about it," Metzger said.

As more people got involved in protecting the falcons, the wildlife in the area was highlighted.

"In the course of all of that, everybody figured out that, 'Wow, there are a lot of birds in the river corridor here,' " Metzger said.

Through the finances of Lycoming Audubon Society, Susquehanna Greenway Partnership, the state Game Commission and Audubon Pennsylvania, the signs were created to help the community identify the birds along the river walk.

The county Planning and Community Development Department also got involved to help approve and make the signs uniform. Crews from the county pre-release center installed the signs.

"It's one way that the county prison system can give back to the county by doing something positive to the community ... I like being outdoors, so it's a win-win situation to do something like this," said Jeff Dawes, county pre-release work crew foreman.

"We've done an excellent job at dealing with the 10 percent of Pennsylvanians that hunt," said Doty McDowell, northcentral region information and education supervisor with the state Game Commission. "Our new strategic plan talks about how to reach the 90 percent of the people who live in this commonwealth that don't hunt, who just enjoy wildlife. This is a perfect example. This is exactly the kind of focus our agency has in place as we move forward."

During the ceremony, as the group discussed how the river walk is the perfect vantage point to see birds along the river, a bald eagle flew over and perched for a few moments in a tree. Despite the rainy weather, those in the group joked that it could not have been planned better.

"The river walk opens many people's eyes to whole new forms of life and, in addition, the walkers and bicyclists get a more active, healthy living lifestyle," said Jerry Walls, chairman of the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership Board. "People do like to connect with the river."

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Gary Metzger, president of the Lycoming Audubon Society, cuts a ribbon during a ceremony to place two of three interpretive signs about birds along the Susquehanna River Walk in Williamsport last Tuesday.