



21ST CENTURY FOX

One Earth, One Chance

Sierra Club Valley of the Fox Group
Serving Kane and Kendall Counties

Winter 2008 Volume 18, No. 1

Into Our Own Wild: A Solo Camping Report

by Nate Stelton

Perhaps all too often, being an active Sierra Club member involves activities that smack of the work-a-day world, whether it's working the phones and computers or breaking a sweat out in the field planting riverbanks and cleaning trails. But I try to never forget the underlying force that drives me to this: experiencing and appreciating the beauty of nature and wildlife. I suppose that's why I've had this recurring itch to do a true solo excursion into the one of the last remnants of the wild. I think I finally scratched that itch, in northern Wisconsin's Willow Flowage.

The Flowage is a fairly recent acquisition and ward of the state's DNR. The area covers over 16,000 acres, with nearly half of that water, and provides habitat for loons, bald eagles, black bear, white-tailed deer, two wolf packs, and much more. Thirty-five primitive campsites, watercraft or trail access only, are sparsely sprinkled throughout the area. I was there in early October, and neither encountered or heard another human, save a couple of rare moments of a faint outboard motor noise somewhere in the distance. I had the place to myself.

I parked near the Willow Dam, the lake's apparent point of civilization, loaded my two packs and 2.5 gallons of



Photo by Nate Stelton.

water into the canoe, and shoved off. The weather was unseasonably warm, but the cloud cover was thick and somewhat ominous. It was only a 2-mile paddle to my destination island campsite, but the lake's vastness and variances from the map had me confused after not too long, and I had to break out the GPS. Because, due to drought, the water level was so low, uncharted sandy land masses caused me to hit a few dead ends and retrace my route. But after a couple hours I beached on my island (appropriately named Paradise) and lugged my gear

up to the site. After the tent was erected, bear rope installed (over a high branch, to hoist the food pack out of reach at night), and rain tarp installed between four trees, my homestead for the next few days was ready.

If I felt any loneliness at first, it faded as my awareness of the wildlife around me grew more acute. Woodpeckers and chickadees made regular forages across the island, and gulls, loons, and herons visited just offshore. An exuberant kingfisher seemed to abide right near my site, and would get very active right at dusk, crisscrossing the sky above me mostly unseen but emitting his long chattering calls. A curious red squirrel made repeated visits, and eventually enticed me into conversations with him. On the first night a pack of wolves treated me to a 30-second choral serenade, from just off the opposite shore. For the sake of my journal, I looked at my watch to note the time of

LOOKING FOR NEW OUTINGS LEADERS

We need local outings leaders. To become a local leader you need to take a Standard First Aid Course offered by the American Red Cross and a weekend OLT (Outdoor Leadership Training) through the Sierra Club.

The Fox Valley area has lots to offer: biking along the Fox River, hiking at numerous forest preserves such as Nelson Lake, and kayaking on the Fox. Being a leader is a great opportunity to get people outdoors and share environmental concerns. If you think this is something you would enjoy doing, please e-mail me at: julieakoivula@sbcglobal.net.

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howling — exactly 8:00 p.m.

In my many wanderings around the island's sandy shores, I encountered fresh tracks from various species, but was mystified by the constantly recurring deer prints, not having ever seen one. (Afterward, I told a local hunter of this and he assured me that the deer, my apparent neighbor, always knew where I was and made sure to be on the opposite side of that island.) I also found a place where it seemed like a snake (or snakes) would make a nightly trek from the island "highlands" to the waterfront and back.

A pair of muskrats made a small lagoon their nocturnal playground. On quiet nights I could hear their periodic "splooshes" from in my tent. At dusk and dawn they were also active and I'd go sit on their shore and watch. At first they were leery of me, but eventually became more comfortable in my presence.

I had packed my entire digital camera ensemble and was hoping to capture fall colors but had apparently missed them. Most of the island was covered by a carpet of freshly fallen maple leaves. Still, the distant shorelines (mostly green with conifers) were punctuated by splashes of red, orange and yellow. Alas, most of the best imagery I encountered was the kind not translatable by the camera.

When alone in nature long enough, I believe one learns to be more aware of both surroundings and inner self, although the constant "housekeeping" tasks keep one from becoming mired in over-analysis. It can become a life-changing experience.

Coincidentally, the book I brought along was Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (devoured in anticipation of the film's pending release). A long stretch of bad weather the second day provided the opportunity to finish it in camp, and its study of various perceived nut cases gave me a foundation for some perspective on my own situation.

The second night assailed me with hours of violent rain and wind so loud I could hardly shake a vision of one of the white pines coming down and smashing my tent. During those sleepless moments, the next chapter in the book described Krakauer's night in a damaged tent in a frigid Alaskan blizzard, days away from any possible help. I also thought about those episodes of *Survivorman* and *Man vs. Wild* where the hapless hero had to build shelters out of poison sumac boughs and elk dung. This made my predicament seem not all that bad. Through sheer mental exhaustion, I finally drifted off. I awoke briefly in the very pre-dawn hours, heard no more pelting, and saw moonlight on the tent ceiling, which gave me simultaneous peace, relief, and near-elation. In the morning I got up early, gathered camera gear, and walked to the other side of the island to watch the sun rise — my first glimpse of it since my arrival, and a welcome one indeed.

The flowage is to me an ecological paradox. Its isolation is such that jet sightings are much rarer than those of bald eagles, and cars or trucks are simply not heard. Yet it owes its entire existence to the Tomahawk Dam, which is used to regulate flow

downstream, at the expense of a stable level in the reservoir. During my stay, the level was so low that, in many places, sandbar islands and stagnant pools were created, exposing tree stumps and bottom-logs, the evidence of logging activities nearly a century ago. Yet the flora and fauna seem to be able to adapt and if they have a problem with these fluctuations, I didn't see it. The human-serving function of the flowage is the very thing that protected it from development, at least up until the state acquired it.

Much of my menu was inspired by Sierra Club service outings I'd been on. This entailed careful planning and packing, as well as choosing meals that are healthy and able to withstand the storage challenges of rising temperatures and squishing. Before the trip, I wrote up a menu chart for the entire camp stay and found myself constantly consulting it to see what I was allowed to prepare and eat each mealtime. I pulled it out numerous other times just to see what I had to look forward to. Food and fire had suddenly risen very high on my life's priority ladder.

Ultimately it was time to go, and the morning of my last day was blessed with crisp, clear weather. My paddle out seemed at once smarter, stronger, and more peaceful. It was indicative of the true souvenirs I unwittingly picked up during my stay on the island.

For more information about the Willow Flowage, go to <http://dnr.wi.gov/forestry/StateForests/SF-NH-AL/NH-AL-willow.htm>.

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name, membership number (eight digit # on the address label of your *Sierra* magazine) and your e-mail address to: editor@illinois.sierraclub.org. If you cannot locate your membership number, please contact fran.caffee@illinois.sierraclub.org.

Thank you for doing your part.

New Listservs

Get involved! Please check the VOF Web site (sierraclub.org/chapters/il/vof) for announcements of new listservs.

Listservs are easy to subscribe to and just as easy to unsubscribe from if you find they generate too much e-mail.

Greetings from the New Co-Chairman

Hello, Valley of the Fox Group! I'm Charlie Zine, an Aurora resident, a Sierra Club Water Sentinel, and your new Co-Chairman! The position came as a surprise to me, but I have long been a supporter of all Sierra Club activities, especially those involving the Fox River, so I accepted when asked to be Co-Chairman.

I grew up in Carpentersville, then lived a brief time in Elgin before moving to Aurora 24 years ago. In all three towns, I could walk to the Fox River, so it has been a significant part of my life. I've peddled my bike along it, paddled canoes and kayaks on it and, like all Aurorans, get my drinking water from it.

Even if you live in the western part of the county, the Fox plays an important role in slowing urban sprawl if for no other reason than if more people bought homes in the urbanized Fox River Valley, fewer would buy new homes built on virgin farm fields in Kane and Kendall Counties.

The key to ending sprawl is to make the urban core a more desirable place for people to live and for consumers to buy in. How do we make that happen? We can look to Aurora for starters.

Aurora has adopted many positive programs and policies to make it a more attractive place to live in the 24 years I've lived here. Once the largest industrial city in the county, it evolved into a typical Rust Belt community with shuttered factories. But Aurora did not give up. It did an objective self-evaluation and adapted to a new economic order.

One thing Aurora did was recognize the important role the Fox River continued to play in the city. The Fox Valley Park District, which serves Aurora, North Aurora, and Montgomery, began buying up river frontage for a scenic drive in the 1940s. This evolved over time into the Fox River Trail. Kane County followed suit and the trail system grew to the length of the county.

Aurora and Elgin both started to draw water from the Fox to augment their network of deep and shallow wells. This put pressure on to further reduce the amount of pollution that was introduced into the waterway. Factories were torn down along the river and land turned into parks and public spaces where the public could watch fireworks on the fourth of July or listen to the American Legion Band Concerts or the Blues on the Fox Festival.

Aurora was not alone in redeveloping the river front to public uses but, in 2006, it went one step further and passed the river front Vision Plan. This far-reaching plan establishes the primary uses of the entire river front (outside of the downtown) from North Aurora to

Montgomery as Open Space, Parks, Recreation, Trails, and Public Gathering places. Residential development was accepted as a secondary use but with conditions. These spaces would have to be developed as open space, parks, trails, natural areas, and public spaces which would be connected to the cities growing network of RiverWalks and the Fox River Trail.

The Riverwalk and Fox River Trail system were also seen as pedestrian transportation corridors, in addition to recreational trails. As such, they are important routes for pedestrians and bicyclists to get to the Metra train station. Aurora has two of the busiest commuter train stops in all of Chicagoland. The closeness of the train station to some older neighborhoods is being exploited as an incentive for further redevelopment of these neighborhoods.

The new Rivers Edge Park planned for the east bank just north of downtown Aurora calls for a large new pedestrian bridge which would connect West Park Ave. to the train station as well as the Fox River Trail on both banks. The ability to bike or walk to the trains saves money on gas and promotes exercise, reduces pollution, and allows people to become less dependent on automobiles and take better advantage of existing public transportation infrastructure. When viewed in their entirety, the coordinated strategy of walkable neighborhoods, recreation, open spaces and natural areas along with the normal conveniences found in urban areas, gives a peek at a 21st Century urban area offering real options to homeowners who'd otherwise gravitate to a new home in a far flung suburban area that was a cornfield in the not-too-distant past.

The playbook Aurora is following for this eco-friendly redevelopment is called New Urbanism. It is a nationwide phenomenon, breathing new life into older cities while at the same time slowing urban sprawl.

Existing cities, like Aurora, offer plentiful jobs, good transportation, diverse housing, and many other desirable amenities that make life more convenient. They also have abundant entertainment and cultural venues and ample retail choices. But there are disadvantages. Before the 1980s, builders did not have to provide space for parks and schools when proposing new housing developments, thus older cities often have fewer parks, less open space, natural or green areas than county or

suburban developments. Adding these "Green" features to an existing urban area is neither cheap nor easy, yet if we are to slow the urban sprawl consuming farms and natural areas, it is a necessary expense. It is one thing for voters to elect a green candidate (like Aurora's Mayor Weisner) but another to pass budgets that fund these legitimate green initiatives intended to make our urban areas more desirable places to live (and thus preserve the undeveloped portions of our counties).

The point is all Sierra Club VOF members, regardless of where you call home, have a vested interest in helping Aurora succeed in its efforts to re-brand itself as a New Urbanism community. Success here will be noted by other towns: Oswego, Yorkville, Geneva, Batavia, Sugar Grove and Elburn.

How can you help? Write the Mayor and Alderman of Aurora. Urge them to continue with plans to de-industrialize the Fox River. Applaud their efforts to build the River's Edge Park with its pedestrian bridge, music venues and natural areas so that the Fox becomes the attraction in Aurora that draws people to live, work and play here, to utilize public transportation as well as bikes and walking paths, to walk to a neighborhood store instead of driving to a mall for a gallon of milk.

You can write letters to the editor and share these ideas with readers, urging them to support these issues and expenditures. Write to your local village, county, or township board members. Ask them if they are aware of what Aurora is doing to transform itself and in the process slow down demand for new construction on the fringes of the urban core.

But the real thing we as Sierra Club members need to understand is that, regardless of where we live in Kane and Kendall County, farmette, unincorporated village, or downtown Aurora condo, we share the same agenda on what may at first glance appear to be a local issue. Just as a Maple Park resident should care about the greening of the Fox River corridor in Aurora, Aurorans should (and do) care about the Prairie "Sprawlway" in Big Rock. Elements of urban sprawl are consuming our land and, ultimately, our lifestyle. I like living in Aurora but also like to run around Nelson Lake, kayak on the Lower Fox below Yorkville, and bike the country lanes of Big Rock Township. It's all my home.

Visit the Valley of the Fox Web Site! <http://www.sierraclub.org/chapters/il/vof>
Sign Up for the Valley of the Fox ListServe!

To: IL-VOFNEWS@LISTS.SIERRACLUB.ORG Subject: [leave blank]
Message: SUBSCRIBE IL-VOFNEWS [your name]

VOF Calendar of Events

For more information about outings and hikes, see the Outings section of the *Lake & Prairie*.

All meetings are held at the Batavia Public Library at 7 p.m. the 2nd Monday of each month except July, August and December. The public is invited to attend.

Check the website for outings!

January 14 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Brad Walker will speak about the Upper Mississippi River (Minnesota to Cairo) environment in four topics: The river's background; environmental status; types of restoration and their benefits; and UMR restoration programs: The Environmental Management Program & Navigation and Ecological Sustainability Program.

January 19 (Saturday) -

Cross Country Ski at LeRoy Oaks Forest Preserve in St. Charles. Ski 9 a.m.-noon on ungroomed trails of this beautiful 340-acre preserve, hike if no snow. Rentals not available on site. Pre-registration required, call leader Jan Mangers for details at 630-897-0922.

February 11 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Local architect Lane Allen will present ideas on LEED (Linking Education and Economic Development) communities. Aurora's new Police Station will be LEED certified.

March 10 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Gene Schultz, VOF Political Chair, will talk about local candidates. He'll tell us who is really green and who is not.

April 14 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Local conservationist Jon Duerr speaks on native species in Kane/Kendall county and how to incorporate them into your garden.

May 12 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Guest presenter Leo Modica, bird photographer, brings us our feathered friends — through the lens.

June 9 (Monday) -

General membership meeting. Julie Koivula speaks on how to live greener. She'll discuss rain barrels, rain gardens, and things we can do to help the environment and save us money.

Watch the Wheel Roll As You Enjoy a Boat Trip on the Fox River.

Back by popular demand, VOF will sponsor a fund-raising paddle boat excursion on the beautiful Fox River/St. Charles. Details in the next issue but mark your calendar now for July 26. Volunteers are needed to help with details, call Ted Penesis at 847-742-3291.

ATTENTION MEMBERS!!!

The Valley of the Fox Group would like to send short e-mail messages to our members occasionally. The quickest and most efficient way for us to do this would be by e-mail. If you are interested, and we hope you are, please send your e-mail address to: vf-newsed@illinois.sierraclub.org. Thank you!

According to one of our readers, the list of the top gas guzzlers was a bit unrealistic. The average person does not drive the cars previously listed.	Dodge Durango Limited	12 mpg
	Cadillac Escalade	13 mpg
	Jeep Commander Limited 5.7	13 mpg
This updated list was provided by Sierra Club member Ken Kornita.	Land Rover LR3 SE	13 mpg
	Nissan Armada LE	13 mpg

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2008 VOF VIPs

ATTENTION MEMBERS!! We have an updated VOF Officers list.

Terri Voitik and Charlie Zine	Co-Chairs
Fran Caffee	Vice-Chair/Water Sentinels
Julie Koivula	Secretary/Outings
Ron Bedard	Treasurer/Clean Air & Water

Additional ExCom Members

Jan Mangers	
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Ted Penesis	PaddleBoat Fund Raiser
Nate Stelton	HELEN [Data]
Barb Vrchota	Newsletter Editor

All VOF officers can be reached by e-mail by using: firstname.lastname@illinois.sierraclub.org, ie. fran.caffee@illinois.sierraclub.org.

Check the website for updates at www.sierraclub.org/il/vof.

21st Century Fox is published quarterly by the Valley of the Fox Group of the Sierra Club. Send all submissions to Barbara Vrchota at bvrchotacomcast.net. Deadline for the next issue is February 1, 2008.