For the Birds

Dr. Richard Bjorklund and his son Sigurd take matters into their own hands in an effort to assist declining bird populations.

Story By Jeanne Townsend Handy
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Dr. Richard Bjorklund led me down a tree-lined trail and into a story I had not anticipated.

The trail is on personal property that the retired Bradley University professor is restoring to a more natural state and is but a part of a fascinating saga that includes bird surveys, habitat restoration and a solar-powered utility shed. I hustled to keep up with Dr. Bjorklund who walked at a pace belying his advanced years, amazed once again at the magnitude of his endeavors. This was not, in fact, the first time I had tagged along with this determined biologist.

My first outing with Bjorklund was in November of 2006, when he allowed me to join him and his son Sigurd on their 223rd consecutive weekly bird survey outing to the Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is situated in the middle of the Mississippi Flyway along the Illinois River near Havana and provides crucial resting and feeding areas for waterfowl and other migratory birds. For the Bjorklunds, the refuge provides an endless source of scientific inquiry and discovery.

"I learn something every time," claimed Dr. Bjorklund.

As we traveled the 10.8-mile standardized route that he and Sigurd drive weekly around Lake Chautauqua, I began to better understand the Bjork-

The back of Richard Bjorklund's hat—"Start seeing birds"—proclaims his belief in knowledge gained from awareness.

Richard and Sigurd Bjorklund pose atop the observation tower at the Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge during their 223rd consecutive survey outing.

lund motivation. I would learn that their dedication stems from an appreciation for other species brought about by knowledge of them, from a desire to see decisions made for the right reasons, from a belief that we, as citizens, can play a role in alleviating problems such as the decline in waterfowl species.

With eyes flashing and a professorial flair, Dr. Bjorklund praised the scientific process, the importance of consistency in their route, the checking of temperatures, water levels, wind speeds, the presence or absence of white caps on the water. He made it clear that decisions need to be based on facts, not emotion. If the facts show that certain human activities have certain effects on species we may care about then we have to decide, in this context, what is most important.

What is important to the Bjorklunds is life in the company of other species. It is so important, in fact, that Richard and Sigurd have been conducting these surveys since 1996. It is so important that they would have a streak of 225 consecutive outings—more than four years without a miss—before it was snapped by a tremendous snowstorm. And although the streak was broken, the surveys continue. The Bjorklunds have missed only five weeks over the past six years.

Dr. Bjorklund's carefully marked data sheet, from which he produces reports he faxes to refuge personnel, the Forbes Biological Station, The Nature Conservancy, and others, presents a portrait of well-traveled beings and the effects our decisions may have upon them. Which species are present and when do they arrive and depart? Are their numbers rising or decreasing? What are the variables involved?

On the day I joined the Bjorklunds at the Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge, a shiver-inducing drizzle turned our outing miserable. I recall being somewhat relieved when, at one of our final stops, Sigurd kindly told me I could remain in the vehicle while he stepped out to survey. I watched him through the windshield as he determined the species present on Lake Chautauqua and their numbers, peering through his spotting scope with the hood of his jacket pulled up, mist clouding his glasses.

From the vehicle, I could make out only a vague impression of birds in the misty gloom, like an image of a hazy past merging into an uncertain present. What kind of scene had presented itself in the heyday of migration through the Illinois Valley when, at their peak concentration in 1949, the lesser scaup numbered 700,000? How amazing was it to find, in 1952, more than 100,000 canvasbacks?

In less than a decade, the maximum number of lesser scaup had declined to 10,075. By 1971, the peak number of canvasbacks dropped to the alarming total of 120. "Crashed" is the term used to describe these declines in a report co-authored by Dr. Stephen Havera, the former director of the Forbes Biological Station and, as it turns out, a former Bradley University student of Richard Bjorklund's. Havera also called attention to a "downward trend" in total ducks inventoried on the Illinois River from 1948 to 2000. "(B)ecause of human actions, the once-magnificent habitat of the Illinois River valley has become degraded, and the number of ducks passing through the valley each fall has steadily declined," he reported.

Sigurd Bjorklund (below) surveys Lake Chautauqua. Dr. Bjorklund carefully marks his data sheets (right), from which he produces reports that are shared with others.

Dense vegetation nearly hides one of three ponds created on Dr. Bjorklund's property to assist declining amphibian populations.

This is why Chautauqua, a place that Richard Bjorklund refers to as part of a "stepping stone series of stopover places," is so crucial. The refuge has been designated a Globally Important Bird Area and a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site for waterfowl and shorebirds seeking food and safe haven. Decisions made at Chautauqua are important beyond Illinois or even this country, as is the information provided by Richard and Sigurd Bjorklund. But will such refuges, as imperative as they are, be enough to halt the steady decline?

"We need to have all of the public, private, nongovernmental and governmental agencies—everybody—on the same page on a plan for the Illinois River Valley as a system—interrelated, interdependent parts," Richard stressed to me, months later, as we walked the trails of his land. As I admired three small ponds he has created because "the amphibians are in trouble" and the pasture-turned-prairie and the sparkling leaves of the clustered poppy mallow, a "prize of the sand prairie," he told me how the financial difficulties of the former, development-minded owner of this land, which is located across the street from his home, allowed him to snatch up small parcels at various intervals and negotiated prices.

Eventually, the entire parcel was his, the development was history, and the restoration process, which has now been in progress for 21 years, was under way. To document habitat changes he has installed numbered wooden stakes that act as monitoring stations. To document his restoration goals, he installed another, larger sign near the roadway with the help of former students. On it is a quote from the early conservationist, Aldo Leopold:

Numbered monitoring stations at the restoration site are useful in tracking habitat changes as 44 acres of pasture return to prairie. A prickly pear cactus (lower left) in bloom is a native of sand prairies.

A quote from conservationist Aldo Leopold conveys Richard Bjorklund's restoration goals.

"Conservation is a state of harmony between humankind and land."

Finally, we returned to the place where we started the tour—Richard's solar-powered utility shed. In most utility sheds you expect to find a lawn mower, a rake or two. But Richard Bjorklund's shed contains a work bench on one side where he prepares seeds destined for the nearly 44-acre restoration area and, on the other, a mini-library of reference books. The roof sports a solar panel that provides the shed's electricity.

"When the sun's up, I just turn on the sun," he stated.

As he praised his collaborators in controlling the shed's climate—the conifer trees that provide a windbreak; the properly situated deciduous trees, which offer a cooling effect during the hot summer months and then drop their leaves in winter to allow more sun to strike the shed and its solar panel—the tiny building suddenly seemed a tangible representation of Richard Bjorklund's beliefs.

Within this shed, in its shelves of books and its workbench, I saw his belief in combining knowledge with action. I saw a demonstration of the interdependence, the interrelatedness, he has spoken of in the interaction between solar panel, sun and the surrounding trees.

Within the existence of this shed is his assertion that we should not "just stand around and criticize while doing nothing," as all too many people tend to do.

And in it is the message Richard Bjorklund wants us to hear above all others—that win-win solutions are possible for humans and wildlife in the Illinois River valley.

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Shelves of reference books are visible through the doorway of Richard Bjorklund's solar-powered shed. A solar panel on the roof (below) provides electricity for the shed, allowing Bjorklund to "just turn on the sun."