

Iowa Exotica – A Glimpse of the Unique, Strange and Natural Places Still Left in and around Iowa

Campout Speech by Jeff Nekola

Jeff Nekola's Campout presentation was packed with slides, which was a fascinating visual presentation, but would have been difficult to transcribe. We have therefore included Kent's introduction along with some of Jeff's opening and closing remarks during his slide show, because his comments were so meaningful and eloquent. We are not including Jeff's commentary on the slides, although the images were beautiful and a real bonus to those members who were able to see them during Jeff's Campout presentation. Following Jeff's opening remarks and conclusion, below, is an article dealing with similar topics that Jeff wrote last year for the Wapsipinicon Almanac.

Introduction by Kent Whealy: Our next speaker is Jeff Nekola, who is a professor of conservation biology at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. Each year Jeff brings groups of his students to Heritage Farm for field trips. He and his students raise funds for those trips by selling heirloom tomato plants each spring. Those of you who were here at last year's Campout may have attended Jeff's workshop, during which he conducted a tour of one of the algific talus slopes here at Heritage Farm. Jeff has a special interest in algific cold-air slopes in this area, which are home to numerous rare and endangered plant and snail species. Last year in September when Jeff was here with his biology students, he took a sample of the litter from the site here and has now identified 21 species of snails, including one that is been considered for the Federal Threatened Species list. An article on Jeff's discoveries has just been published in our *Summer Edition*. Diane and I have enjoyed immensely our walks with Jeff around Heritage Farm and the adjoining valleys, and we have already learned so very much from him and look forward to spending more time together. Today Jeff will present a slide show entitled "Iowa Exotica – A Glimpse of the Unique, Strange and Natural Places Still Left in and around Iowa." It's a real pleasure for me to introduce my friend Jeff Nekola.

Thanks so much. It's a real privilege to be here to talk to you and show you some of the things that really excite me a lot about living here in the Midwest. There are two comments I want to make before I get started. One, this is not a normal slide show where I'd show you a picture and then talk at length. I'm going to bombard you with 140 slides, images and names of plants and animals that you've likely never heard of before, strange places that you didn't know existed in this part of the world. I know you're not going to remember it all – the point isn't that you remember it but that you walk away with a sense that Iowa is more than cornfields and more than pigs. In the

conservation biology community, people hear that I'm from Iowa and they laugh and say, "Why are you a conservation biologist in Iowa?" and I get indignant. Over the next hour, you will see the reason for my indignation.

Another thing I hope you walk away with is a sense that Iowa is as important to conservation as any other place in the world, that the Midwest is a forgotten corner because we assume that everything is gone. We assume that when the settlers came here, they plowed up everything, every last bit and piece. That's simply not the case. Sometimes I think that our attention to the rain forest diverts our attention from what we have in our own backyards. In the Green Bay public school system, where I now live, they spend a lot of time talking about the rain forest, but not about the natural areas around Green Bay that are being threatened by development or whatever. Students walk away thinking that it's those terrible peasants in Brazil that are responsible, and not themselves. But there are things we can be doing to help protect our own heritage. So I hope that as I bombard you with these images and names, you will get a sense of how diverse and complex and amazing and interesting Iowa is.

And I use Iowa as a metaphor, because if diversity can be in Iowa, it can be anywhere. Iowa has been more altered than any other place in the Western hemisphere by human beings, European humans, at least. A very very small piece of what was originally here still exists. There's no other place that has been so adversely affected in the Western hemisphere. So if diversity can still be found here, it can be anywhere. Therefore, since moving to Wisconsin, I've found that on the campus of my university, some of these same species that we're talking about that we thought only lived in Iowa, also live on the campus there. And why are they there? Well, for various reasons, different from here. Why weren't they found? Because no one ever thought to look, because Green Bay and Brown County in eastern Wisconsin has been all pastured out for the last 100 years. Not true. So wherever you come from, whether it's Iowa or Indiana or Illinois or Missouri, I can assure you that in your backyard there are places just as amazing and interesting as what I will be showing you. So use this as a metaphor of what is possible in your own backyard. Go out and look for it and discover these things, and we can find that there are things as amazing here in our own backyards as in Brazil or Costa Rica or anywhere else.

Conclusion: I want to let you know that all is not well. We still have the diversity, but it's going to disappear soon. It is disappearing as we speak. It's not just the rain forest; it's in our own backyard. What we need to do is educate people, help farmers out financially so they can help save these places and don't have to plow them up to plant more corn. What we need to do is to try to work collectively, get information out, work with the community, to try to save these places. And if we do, then I think these fens and cold air slopes, the ice caves, the deserts, the rock outcroppings that I've been showing you can still be saved.