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Bob's Special Places in Richland County

Text and Photos by Al Cornell

MY CO-OP

The log cabin in the village of Orion has taken on an aura of faith, family, and friends. Once a week, several villagers grab coffee cups and head to Bob and Jan Hirschy's for sticky rolls. The Hirschys have been working at downsizing into the cabin since last November.

I visited Bob, hoping to retrace some of his impact on Richland County. The Hirschys came to the area in 1967 when Bob accepted the charter member position of assistant biology professor when the doors of UW–Richland opened. He retired in 1999 and is formally Robert A. Hirschy, Associate Professor Emeritus, Biological Sciences, but really just Bob.

As soon as he arrived at campus, his footprint began showing up in the county and beyond. Actually, his footprints soon appeared in every corner of the county as he began weaving the unique ecosystems of Richland County into the fabric of UW–Richland biology classes.

Over the years, about 2,500 students went on his all-day field trips to visit many unique natural areas and learn fascinating details about our Driftless Area ecology. Some of those students ended up with T-shirts that boasted, "I survived the all-day biology field trip." And they all learned a few things during that day's adventures. For most, it was one of those rare schooldays from which something actually got forever programmed into the memory.

A page in "Richland Center High School Outstanding

Bob Hirschy looks over Basswood Pond, one of his designated scientific areas.

Alumni Honorees, 2014" contains this comment by Krista Thompson Searls: "The UW–Richland Campus for 2 years was my next education where the most enthusiastic teacher EVER who showed me how to teach was...Robert Hirschy. After I took the required Biology, I then took his Botany class just to watch him teach."

Years later, Krista received a master's degree with her thesis entitled, "The Effective Use of Humor in the Secondary Classroom." She added, "So two key components of good teaching, I believe, are enthusiasm and humor." She went on to mentor new teachers, so a touch of Hirschy's classroom presentation continues to reach beyond this hill country.

Bob and I took a trip around the county to visit scientific areas that he had located and designated. Several of these were on private land, and some changes had occurred since they were last utilized for teaching.

Bob pointed out that Richland County exhibits ecological diversity due to its location. He penned an article entitled "Driftless Diversity" in the spring 1975 issue of *Wisconsin Academy Review*. In it he wrote, "Richland County (and all of southwestern Wisconsin) is located at sort of a junction of three major North American biomes. To the west are



the prairies, to the south the mesic hardwood forests, and to the north are the mixed conifer and hardwood forests. It is not at all surprising, then, that small differences in temperature and moisture at a particular site will greatly influence the plant species present.”

The remnant northern species, which persist especially on north-facing cliffs along cool creeks, add a rich

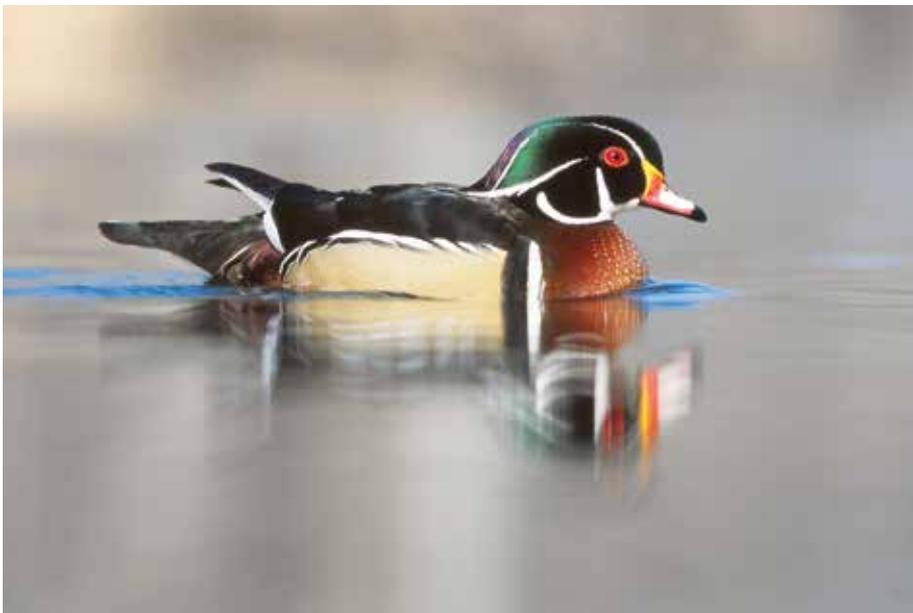
ecological element. Thousands of years ago, melting glaciers surrounding the driftless area cooled the region and created an environment where northern species could persist until wind, wildlife and, in a few places, water could reintroduce their seeds to areas exposed by the retreating glaciers.

From Richland Center, we headed toward the southwest corner of the

county. After looking at a climax maple-basswood forest, we went to check on a large American chestnut tree. The tree had died, perhaps of chestnut blight, and only a large stump remained. Chestnut trees were amazing producers of nuts utilized by man and wildlife, and had been the most abundant trees east of the Mississippi before Eurasian chestnut blight reached this country in the early 1900s. Wisconsin, being north of the natural chestnut range, just had a few trees planted by Native Americans and settlers. The Wisconsin Conservation Department distributed a few seedlings from 1942 to 1944. Though isolated from the main range, most chestnuts in Wisconsin eventually contracted chestnut blight.

We headed east along the Wisconsin River and stopped by wetlands near Basswood. Though wetlands were a major component of the pre-settlement Midwest landscape, few existed in the unglaciated hill country with its fast-flowing creeks. The neat wetlands we stopped at are home to cattails, sedges, pickerelweed, wood ducks, pied-billed grebes, marsh wrens, and many other species.

Next, we drove past an island that



Clockwise, starting above left: Streams and ponds are home to the beautiful wood duck; sandy areas in southern Richland County are habitat for prickly pear cactus; north-facing cliffs can support species that normally occur farther north.



Left: The Hub City Bog is a prime example of Bob Hirschy's work to preserve our natural heritage. Below: A cool zone above Melancthon Creek provides beauty and educational value.



had served as an example of lowland hardwood forests dominated by silver maple, river birch, and robust poison ivy. At the southeast corner of the county, we visited remnant prairie sites that contained big and little bluestem, Indian grass, spiderwort, and prickly pear cactus among their native prairie species.

As we headed north, we observed tamarack on the Sextonville Bog. Bob told me that it is the most southwesterly of any bog, maintaining its place where the landscape had mostly transitioned to prairie. Several species have existed on the bog since the cooling by glaciers caused more northerly species to retreat and hang on south of their normal range.

Then we viewed some hemlock and white pine along Willow and Melancthon Creeks. Both species are common farther north in Wisconsin, and, while white pine plantings are common in Richland County, hemlock persists predominately in cool sites. On those cool, north-facing sandstone cliffs, Labrador tea had hung on above the creeks. Bob was glad that we did find one Labrador tea plant, but wondered if climate warming was on the verge of eliminating this northern species from our area.

Our last stop was at the Hub City Bog. When Bob had first visited the bog, he sought out the Henrietta town board. He explained to board members that this bog was a biological gem. They were impressed and found a different location for the town dump. Next, he got The Nature Conservancy interested

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in buying the bog to protect it. When the Oconomowoc Garden Club came forward with dollars and looking for a worthy place to spend them, The Nature Conservancy was able to purchase the bog and gave it to the UW Board of Regents for caretaking.

This special place has showy lady slippers, bog bluegrass, and poison sumac. The bog formed over an old

oxbow lake along the Pine River. When Bob took biology classes there, he would ram a long stick through the mat to demonstrate the depth of the water under the mat. A few years ago, larch bark beetles killed 70 percent of the tamarack, but now they are making a comeback. The purchased area includes the nearby cliff across Soules Creek that harbors clintonia and sphagnum moss, and a westerly facing area with prairie species.

We did not make it to the northwest and west central areas of the county where yew relics persist at Tunnelville and Cedar Point. Pop's Cave was another of Bob's scientific areas on that side of the county.

Bob emphasized that when he talked to landowners about special places on their property, they were impressed and interested in preserving those sites for their unique examples of Richland County's natural environment and for educational purposes. Many area residents benefited from Bob as a teacher, and many continue to have their lives enriched because he is still a teacher, even in retirement. And Richland County seems more enchanting because Bob pointed out its special places. 



CELLAR GRAPES

The summer rains had come regularly and the wild grapes that grew on the fence alongside the woods hung heavy with the lush, blue fruit.

One night at the supper table Ma said, “We ought to bottle up some of them grapes and make us a grape drink.” My brothers and I picked a pail of the plump little grapes. They were much smaller than the grapes sold at the grocery store.

Returning to the kitchen, Ma removed the stems from the grapes and began stuffing them into bottles. They were small enough so they fit easily. When each bottle was about two-thirds full of grapes, she topped it off with warm water and Pa capped each one with the bottle capper. Pa carried the filled bottles to the cellar where he lined them up on one of the cellar shelves, alongside all the other canning that Ma had done during the summer.

A month passed. In the middle of the night we were all awakened to the sound of a terrific explosion coming from the basement. It was louder than the loudest firecracker. Pa got up, lit a lantern, and headed for the cellar. When he came upstairs he reported that one of the grape bottles had blown up. “There’s busted glass all over the place,” Pa said.

After the morning chores were done, Pa was back in the cellar where he carefully removed a couple bottles of grapes and brought them into the kitchen. The bottles were dusty and covered with cobwebs. Ma found a bottle opener, grabbed up one of the bottles and snapped off the cap. Little bullet-like grapes shot out of the bottle like they’d had a charge of gunpowder behind them. They went flying past Ma’s nose so fast she never saw them.

Ma had a strange look on her face. She was staring at the empty bottle while grapes and grape juice dripped down on her from the ceiling and splattered on the kitchen table. Pa

stood off to the side, laughing loudly. I didn’t know if I should laugh or run.

“Where are them grapes coming from?” Ma finally said. She brushed her hand across her forehead, creating a purple smudge. Then Ma looked up at the drippy ceiling and back at the empty bottle and she began laughing, too. Soon all five of us were scrubbing fermented grapes from the ceiling, from the walls, from the windows, and from the floor.

When we were finished with the kitchen cleanup, Pa very carefully brought up the rest of the grape bottles from the cellar. Outside we snapped the caps off each bottle, and watched grapes shoot sometimes 30 feet or more.

The following summer the wild grape crop was also plentiful. I asked Ma if I should pick some of the ripe grapes for her. “No thanks,” she said. “I think I’ll leave them for the birds.

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