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Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Back to the Birds:**  
*Presque Isle's Ospreys*

**By David Frew**  
**August 2023**

*Editor's Note: While Dr. David Frew is away, please enjoy one of his classic "On the Waterfront" articles. It ran originally in September 2021.*



*Osprey nesting boxes such as this one on the shores of Chautauqua Lake have helped with the reintroduction of a once threatened, magnificent bird.*

One of my first Jefferson essays, written two years ago, was titled “[How Does the Osprey Know?](#)” It described my amazement after driving to Waterworks to watch a truck filled with about-to-be-stocked trout be emptied into the settling ponds, and suddenly noticing two ospreys sitting in nearby trees, seemingly waiting for the almost helpless fish to be released. The trout release and subsequent osprey feeding frenzy happened two years in a row, and I wondered how the birds knew. Or if their fortuitous arrival was simply coincidental?

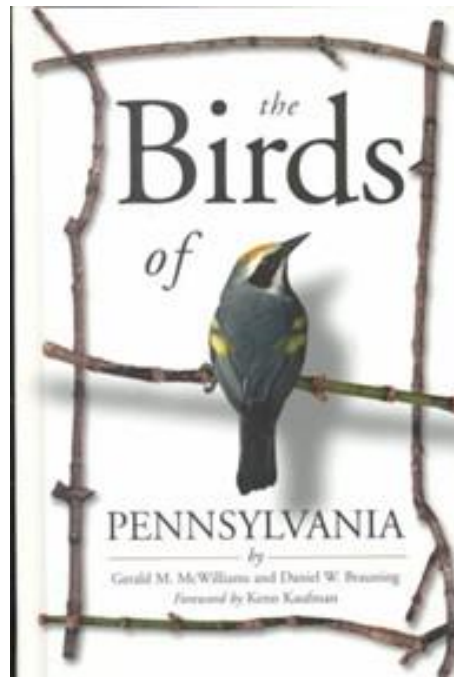
I love birds, especially raptors, but I am far from an expert. I go to Presque Isle State Park often, bird books (plural) in hand, and delight in what I find. But my ability to tell one feathered creature from another or to discern the many nuances of birding is limited. I also attend Presque Isle lectures and a few years ago went to learn about the osprey (fish hawk). Sometime in 2019 (before Covid-19) I was at a lecture at which local statistics were revealed. Literally, hundreds of ospreys had been observed and cataloged while flying over or stopping at Presque Isle, but the lecturer said the ospreys were migrating birds on their way north to nesting grounds. As in other bird-related lectures, much of the local knowledge revealed was attributed to Jerry McWilliams.



*Telescope over his shoulder, Jerry McWilliams works at Presque Isle..*

A modest and understated man, McWilliams is Presque Isle's bird guru, although he would probably never call himself that. He is, well, much too modest. I have watched his work for decades, beginning the year that he stood on stage at Villa Maria College with Presque Isle Park Superintendent Harry Leslie defending the decision to close Gull Point to boaters at a nasty town meeting. The crowd was so unbelievably hostile that I was both embarrassed and afraid for McWilliams' well-being. There were threats. And his tires were slashed. But he was undaunted as he lobbied for the protection of Presque Isle's birds. McWilliams was doing the "right thing" regardless of the consequences. My friend and colleague, Andy Roth, would call this an act of pure leadership.

He has continued his important work since then, both at his day job as a fish culturist for the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and as a tireless advocate for Presque Isle and its birds. Jerry McWilliams has authored or coauthored countless books, field guides, and articles, including the amazing "Guide to Pennsylvania Birds" and the ongoing inventory of birds spotted at Presque Isle that is available online.



*This book is one of Jerry McWilliams' many published contributions to birding.*

Most germane to this essay, he established the Hawk Watch program at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center and has worked tirelessly to catalog raptors, shorebirds, and other visitors to Presque Isle. During my time at Gannon University, where I was often in contact with Biology Department faculty (my daughter, Cheryl, was a biology major and became an environmental biology professor), there were few conversations about birds or Presque Isle that did not include the mention of McWilliams and his contributions.

When my essay on the ospreys was published a few years ago, I mentioned that the magnificent bird was a migrating visitor but did not nest on Presque Isle. But several responses to the essay convinced me that I was wrong, so I began to search the park for signs of nests. After consulting with park naturalists, I eventually found them and began watching. (I had to pledge not to reveal the nesting locations so that the ospreys would be protected from human interruptions). My wife Mary Ann and I watched with binoculars and our efforts were rewarded. We were treated (from a safe distance) to the amazing annual osprey nesting cycle. Over several weeks, the male and female worked together to build an enormous nest at the top of a tree. The male made countless trips with large branches and the female carefully weaved individual branches into a nest with sides high enough to contain the young when they were born.

During nest building the male regularly hunted, returning with huge fish that he shared with his mate. The female did some hunting, as well, but if her mate was bringing the bulk of the food to the nest to share with her. As we learned at various

ornithology websites, the female was also fetching soft materials such as grasses and moss to line the inside of the nest while the male was alternating between hunting for fish and delivering major structural branches. Theoretical explorations led us to two places: (1) Cornell University and (2) the life's work of nearby bird expert Roger Tory Peterson, who was born in Jamestown, New York. Peterson (1908-1996) was an artist who was fascinated with birds and created the first 'field guide,' a rugged book, filled with accurate color pictures of birds that could be carried outdoors into the field and used to identify different species. His work is still recognized as the best of the many guides that have become available.

Roger Tory Peterson moved to Old Lyme, Connecticut in 1954, to study and draw shorebirds. Shortly after he began working at a favorite site on Connecticut's Atlantic coast, he noticed that one of his favorite species, the osprey, was steadily disappearing. Between 1954 and 1965, he documented the decline in the number of active nests, which dwindled from 150 to only 13. A contemporary of Rachel Carson, Peterson became convinced that DDT and other pesticides were responsible for the osprey decline. He carefully climbed up and into nesting sites where he suspected that the osprey diet of DDT-contaminated fish was causing eggs to be so brittle that the shells broke when females sat on them.

At about the time that Carson's "Silent Spring" was casting suspicion on DDT and other pesticides, Peterson began lecturing on the destruction of the osprey population and threats to other bird populations. Eventually, his work helped to legitimize hers. With Peterson joining Carson in her crusade to eliminate DDT, the chemical was eventually banned both in the United States and internationally, and ospreys began to rebound. Contemporary ornithologists credit Peterson with saving the species from extinction.



*Roger Tory Peterson sketches birds in Connecticut.*



*The Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History is in Jamestown, New York.*

To honor the life and work of Roger Tory Peterson, a wonderful bird center has been established in his hometown of Jamestown, New York, which is just a short drive from Erie, Pennsylvania. Their current exhibit details the amazing nesting cycle that has been taking place at Presque Isle. It begins with the male returning to the previous year's nesting site if it was productive (enough food and a successful hatch). The female returns a month later and for the next month, they rebuild the previous year's nest (or create a new one nearby) after which an egg (sometimes two or three) is produced. The egg(s) hatches in about a month and when it does the female protects the baby while the male hunts for fish. Within five to six weeks, the young osprey is almost as big as its parents, and it becomes safe to leave it alone in the nest while both adults fish. The female then teaches her offspring to fly, usually by the time that it is eight weeks old, and shortly thereafter she leaves, flying south to her winter home. The male stays with the young for another month, teaching it to fish, and finally leaves himself, flying south but to a different location than the female. The young osprey stays with the nest until the first cold days of winter and then heads south, either to the place where the male or the female has gone. First-year ospreys do not return immediately. They remain in the South for one or two seasons and then usually fly back to the place where they were born.

This amazing osprey nesting cycle represents a drama that has been unfolding at Presque Isle for the last two years. Just one more wonder of our amazing park.

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*The Roger Tory Institute of Natural History in Jamestown, New York is well worth the short and beautiful car trip, along and over Chautauqua Lake. Its address is 311 Curtis Street, Jamestown, NY 14701 ([Info@rpti.org](mailto:Info@rpti.org) or call 716-665-2473).*

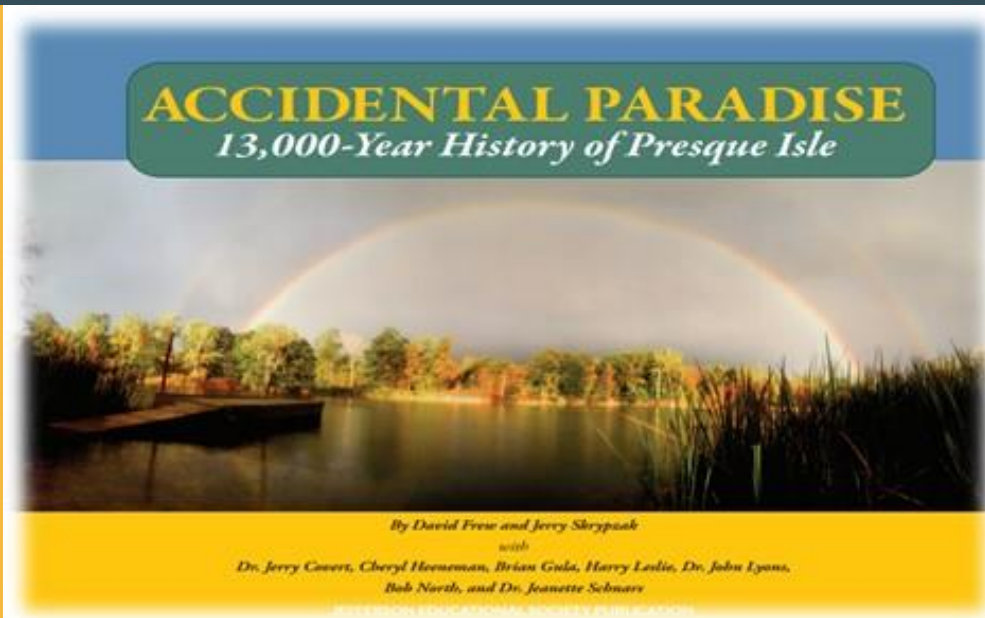
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## *Accidental Paradise Available at TREC!*

*Accidental Paradise*  
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto:aperino@TREC.org).

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*



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