ChequamegonChirps

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Our July meeting will be a picnic July 21 at the Medford School Forest located east of Medford on Highway 64, just east of north-bound Highway C which is about eight miles east of Medford. Highway 64 is closed east of Medford so you will need to take some side roads to get around the closure or use the detour. Good luck. There will be a 6:30 bird walk followed by a meeting and potluck meal. The main dish will be provided by Sue Vick and the Urbans. Plates, cups, and utensils will be provided. You are asked to bring your own beverage and a dish to pass.

Dirty Birds and Such

The heading is facetious since vultures have a dirty job from our point of view. Humans don't eat putrid meat anywhere that I know of. However disgusting it may seem to us, vultures do a great service for humans that saves thousands of lives each year. Vultures, as apex scavengers, do a remarkable job of lessening the spread of possible potential bacteria and diseases to humans from bacteria and water contamination. Vultures, who have excellent smell and visual capabilities, can clean up a cow carcass in less than an hour if there enough of them. Side note here. A couple summers ago there was a deer carcass in a field about two miles east of Dorchester. I don't know how long it had been dead but one day when I went by six turkey vultures were feeding on it. Two days later there were only bare bones visible. They did an excellent job of cleaning up. I don't know how they determine what is eatable for them.

In the mid 1990s the number of vultures in south Asia dropped from 50 million to several thousand from an animal painkiller called diclofenac. When vultures fed on carcasses treated with this medicine, they died. (Maybe our veterinarian members can present more information about why this medicine came into such widespread use in this area of Asia.) By the early 2000s, an estimated 100,000 people were dying annually due to the cascading effect of increased diseases caused by particular bacteria and water contamination according to Sundershan and colleagues reported in the *American Economic*

review. As far as I know, the medicine isn't used anymore and vulture numbers are recovering with the result of hundreds of thousands of people living due to vulture benefits.

According to Chinmay Sonawane, biologist at Stanford University, "To a certain extent vultures were controlling possible routes of disease but weren't when they declined. Our health is very much contingent on the stability and conservation of the natural world."

Among the 1,300 scavenging species in the world about 1/3 are endangered or declining in numbers. Many scavengers use other sources of food in their diets and eat dead animals when convenient or if they are hungry enough. Vultures, are apex scavengers. When their numbers decline, they are replaced by smaller, less efficient wildlife which includes feral dogs and rats. Christopher O"Bryan of Maastrich University said, "Smaller scavengers tend to come into closer contact with humans and are more likely to spread diseases themselves. Feral dogs can disseminate rabies or fleas. Such critters tend to come into closer contact than apex species and so pose a greater risk. Overall study connects the link between ecosystem stability and human well being." There is still much to learn about the role of specific scavengers play in limiting certain diseases. O'Bryan says, "The take home message is that we need to be always factoring nature into the equation of human health. We can't ignore it.

Dirty Bird Theme Continues

While many birds flock together, only few species fly highly organize patterns together such as pelicans, geese, cranes and other waterfowl who form Vs to take advantage of aerodynamic factors that save energy. Then there is a different level of flock flying done by shorebirds, blackbirds and starlings. (Most of the information in this article pertains to starlings) and is from studies of studies. How they form shape shifting forms in tight unison at 40 miles or more per hour has baffled scientists and been admired by careful observers for centuries. Modern technology has started to unravel some of the secrets of these amazing happenings. University of Rhode Island biologist Frank Hepner in the 1970s studied pigeon flocks He proposed they communicated through some sort of neurologically based "biological radio."

"Today, through technical innovations, from high-speed photography to computer simulations, have enabled biologist to view and analyze bird flocks as never before. So has a new wave of interest from other scientists, including

mathematicians, physicists, and even economists. As a result, researchers are closer than ever to really get inside the mind of a flock. There's a lot we don't know now, says Heppner, but I think we're actually going to know how and why birds fly in organized flocks within five years."

Russian biologist Dmitrii Radakov, in the 1960s studied fish schools to determine how they could avoid predators as a whole, if each fish simply coordinates its movements with those of its neighbors. Even if only a handful of individuals know where a predator is coming from, they can guide a huge school by initiating a turn their neighbors emulate---and their neighbor's neighbors and so on. Unlike linear flocks of geese, which do have a clear leader, clusters are democratic. They function from the grassroots; any member can initiate a movement that others will follow. Radakov's theory in the 1980s was further defined when computer programmers began to create models that show how simulated animal groups can respond to movements of individuals within them. It turns out that only three simple rules suffice; to avoid colliding with its immediate neighbors, to be generally attracted to others of its kind, and to move in the same direction as the rest of the group.

This information is only an introduction to an article in the Audubon magazine by Peter Friederici who teaches journalism at Northern Arizona University. As I was finishing up this piece, I noticed the date was March-April 2009. Son-of-a-gun. Correct procedure would be for me to ditch this information and start a new, current article. Not this time. I'm tired. It's late. The information was all new to me. A saying goes, Not good, but good enough to call it done. So be it.

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Club contacts

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Information: Info@chequamegonbirdclub.org

Newsletter@chequamegonbirdclub.org

August Events

Back in Time Tractor Show Medford

August 9th & 10th 10:00 to 3:00each day

Includes rides to Kuse Nature Preserve

Volunteers needed there

Call Scott Stalheim for details

715-065-4145