Big River

Reggie McLeod

Big River, reg@bigrivermagazine.com

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When the Northwoods Flowed Downriver

By Dean Gabbert

The last lumber raft arriving at Fort Madison, Iowa, in 1915, marked the end of the Upper Mississippi River’s biggest and most lucrative enterprise. For 73 years, rough-and-tumble raftsmen ruled the rivers of the north, delivering what seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of logs and lumber. First they floated the rafts and then they towed them with steamboats down the Minnesota, St. Croix, Red Cedar, Wisconsin, Black, Chippewa and Mississippi rivers.

Two remarkable rivermen, Capt. Stephen Hanks and Capt. Walter Hunter, personified the era. Hanks was on the crew of the first lumber raft to reach St. Louis in 1842, and two years later he piloted a log raft on another perilous trip from Stillwater to St. Louis. Hunter was captain of the Ottumwa Belle when she delivered the last raft to the S. and J. C. Atlee mill in Fort Madison on July 14, 1915.

Captain Stephen Hanks

First as a pioneer raftsman and later as a steamboat pilot, Hanks was in a class by himself. He was Abraham Lincoln’s first cousin, and

(Rafting continues on page 2)
like Lincoln, he was born in Kentucky and spent most of his life in Illinois. At 19, he accepted a job in a Minnesota logging camp at the going wage of $200 a year. He had to walk more than 300 miles from his home in Albany, Ill., to get there.

He cut timber in sub-zero weather, dodged hostile Indians, survived snowblindness and battled ice gorges and floods. In 1842, Hanks helped build the first long-distance lumber raft at the head of Lake St. Croix, on the St. Croix River. The basic unit was a crib, 16 feet wide and 32 feet long. It contained 24 layers of one-inch lumber — with alternate layers running at right angles. Crewmen soon learned that the 640-by-96-foot raft had a mind of its own. Laying against the bank, it was almost impossible to move; when the current was strong, it was almost impossible to stop. They wrestled the raft to St. Louis in 43 days.

In 1845, Hanks set up his own business, delivering both log and lumber rafts to St. Louis. He did well for nine years only to be wiped out by a disastrous flood in 1854. His flotilla of four rafts broke up near New Boston, Ill. His loss exceeded $10,000. When he finally paid off his creditors in 1855, he had $75 left.

The Raftsmen's Craft

As the number and size of rafts increased, so did the fearsome reputation of their crews. According to historian Charles Russell, Black River raftsmen were the worst of all. "With them, according to general belief, rafting was but a diversion, the real business of their souls was battle, murder and sudden death... When a Black River raft was signalled, the Widow Fowler invariably hid her spoons."

No one ever devised a dependable method of steering a free-floating lumber raft. Large sweep-oars were no match for a contrary wind that could pin the raft against the bank or even drive it upstream. Because they could be built thicker and carried no waste, lumber rafts were more efficient than log rafts, but it was easier and faster to bring logs to the sawmills that sprung up like mushrooms on the Upper Mississippi. Much of the new lumber was loaded onto trains bound for frontier towns. By the mid-1850s, log rafts outnumbered lumber rafts about 10 to 1.

In 1863, Capt. George Winans was the first to use a boat to push a raft below Lake Pepin. Problems developed and he gave up after only 10 miles. A year later Capt. Cyrus Bradley learned from Winans' mistakes and pushed a raft from Read's Landing, Minn., to Clinton, Iowa. In 1869, Capt. Sam Van Sant, of Le Claire, Iowa, designed and built the first successful raft boat, the J. W. Van Sant. They called him Captain Pluck, and at age 25 he revolutionized the rafting industry. Recognizing that the single-ruddered side-wheelers in use were both underpowered and hard to steer, he built a sternwheeler with beefier engines and four rudders for greater steering control.

The introduction of bow-boats made it possible to safely handle larger rafts. A bow-boat was attached to the head of the raft, at right angles to the raft boat at the stern. Responding to signals from the pilot, the bow-boat would move forward or backward, swinging the head of the raft to the left or right.

The Ottumwa Belle (upper left) made history in 1915 when it brought down the last raft, shown here passing Fountain City, Wis. Note the timbers and lath stacked on top of this lumber raft.
Slough, a 12-mile channel at the mouth of the Chippewa River above the town of Alma, Wis. At the peak of the era, 600 million feet of logs passed through Beef Slough. During the 1873 season, 680 rafts passed under the Davenport-Rock Island bridge. Eighteen rafts were counted on June 5 and again on June 6 — an estimated 54 acres of raft per day.

How big were the biggest rafts? The Saturn, commanded by George Winans, brought down the largest lumber raft from Lake St. Croix to St. Louis in 1901. It was 26 layers deep and measured 270 feet wide and 1,450 feet long, containing 9 million board feet (A board foot is the equivalent of a 1-inch by 1-inch by 12-inch board.) of lumber, including the top load.

The largest log raft was towed by the F.C.A. Denkmann with the H.C. Brockman as her bow-boat. Capt. O.E. McGinley brought the raft from Lynxville, Wis., to Rock Island in 1896. It was 270 feet wide and 1,550 feet long, containing about 2,250,000 logs.

In the meantime, Capt. Hanks had established himself as one of the upper river’s best pilots. For 20 years he served as pilot on most of the packets of the Minnesota Packet Co. and the Diamond Jo Line. His piloting feats were legendary and his peers knew the secret of his success: as a veteran raft pilot, he knew the river better than anyone else. He returned to rafting for a few years in the 1870’s, then he spent 15 years as chief pilot of C. Lamb and Sons, a large Clinton lumber firm that operated its own fleet of raft-boats. He spent his 50th and final year as a pilot aboard a Le Claire boat, the Joe Long, in 1892.

The Trees Run Out

J.C. Atlee came to Fort Madison in 1837 and entered the lumber business in 1853. The Atlee mill grew to be one of the largest on the Upper Mississippi with 300 employees. At its peak, the mill turned out 120,000 feet of lumber, 150,000 shingles and 28,000 lathe during a 10-hour shift. Atlee had a fleet of several raftboats, including the Sam Atlee, the Ottumwa Belle and the Pathfinder.

By the beginning of the 20th century most of the pine forests in Minnesota and Wisconsin were harvested. The rafting era ended officially by the Atlees stopping log rafting in 1915 when the Atlee Company cut the last stand of pine that it owned above St. Paul. Normally, the logs would have been rafted downriver, but a large part of the company’s facilities at Fort Madison had been flooded by the closing of the Keokuk dam. So the logs were floated over the Falls of St. Anthony and rafted to Prescott, where the St. Croix enters the Mississippi. From there they were towed 17 miles upstream to Hudson, Wis., where they were sawed at the Central Lumber Co. mill.

Millions of logs were floated down the St. Croix River, but this might be the only time they were moved upstream.

Captain Walter Hunter

Capt. Hunter of Winona, Minn., felt right at home when the Ottumwa Belle headed downriver from Hudson on July 1, 1915, on its historic run to Fort Madison. He became master of the Belle in 1906, serving until the Atlees halted regular rafting operations. Hunter took leave from his duties as pilot of the packet Morning Star to make the 14-day trip.

The last raft was 28 layers deep, 128 feet wide and 1,150 feet long. It contained 3,500,000 feet of lumber, plus about 1,000,000 feet of top load consisting of timbers, lumber and lathe. The Pathfinder served as bow-boat and a third Atlee vessel, the little steamer J.M., made the trip hitched alongside the raft.

Capt. Hunter, who had a fine sense of history, arranged for Stephen Hanks, the rafting pioneer, to board the Ottumwa Belle when she passed the captain’s home at Albany, Ill. Capt. Hanks, then 94, probably rode the steamer as far as Davenport.

Capt. Hunter spent 62 years on the river before retiring in 1945. He began as a deckhand on the rafter Penn Wright at the age of 15. He received his pilot’s license at 24 and served as master of the Isaac Staples for 12 years before going to the Ottumwa Belle. After service on the Morning Star, he piloted the Mark Twain, a Federal Barge Line tow-boat, and the W.J. Quinlan, Rock Island ferryboat.

Capt. Hanks died Oct. 7, 1917, at his home in Albany, two days short of his 96th birthday. Capt. Hunter, who spent his later years at Bellevue, Iowa, died there Nov. 11, 1962, at the age of 94. The careers of these two notable rivermen totaled an astounding 135 years.

A version of this story appeared in the Spring 1999 newsletter of the Midwest Riverboat Buffs.

Dean Gabbert writes about the river from his home on its banks in Nauvoo, Ill., (river mile 378.6). He is the retired publisher and editor of The Fairfield (Iowa) Ledger. His last story for Big River was "Board Volunteer" (October 1998).
to travel beyond their ponds. Stocking the black carp’s Asian relatives — the silver, bighead and grass carp — mainly in Arkansas aquaculture ponds, started full-scale invasions by these species of the Missouri, Upper Mississippi and the Des Moines rivers.

“The bighead carp has become so abundant at some locations in this state’s large rivers that commercial fishermen can’t even lift their nets, they are so full of bigheads,” said Norm Stucky, Missouri’s Chief of Fisheries. Not only is the bighead crowding out native fish, but, unlike other carp species, people don’t even find it good to eat.

All three Asian carp species, the redear sunfish or shellcracker (Lepomis microlophus), also eats the parasite and could be used to control the invaders’ agressive breeding habits will thwart any permanent solutions, according to MICRA.

Some officials believe that Emperor Akihito may have inadvertently caused the invasion when he brought a bluegill, a gift from Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley, to Japan in 1960.

According to biologist Pam Thiel of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, last fall’s “Annual Goby Roundup,” conducted in the Cal-Sag ship canals near Chicago, turned up one goby below the barrier site, on the Illinois River about a quarter mile above where the Des Plaines River joins the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal.

The barrier is scheduled for completion by June 2000 and is expected to slow the movement of gobies and other exotics from the Great Lakes into the Mississippi River Basin (see “The Gobies Are Coming” in Big River, November 1999).

Two-way Street

While environmentalists bemoan invasions of round gobies and black carp in the Mississippi River, the emperor of Japan worries about bass and bluegill displacing his country’s native fish.

Bluegill and largemouth bass now make up 99 percent of the fish populations in eight of the 13 moats surrounding the Imperial Palace. The bluegill eat the eggs of the native hase, goby and stubby, while largemouth bass find goby minnows a delicacy.

Nobuo Ichihara, deputy superintendent of the Environment Agency, pronounces the moats “a symbol of Japan” and says “It’s scary to think what may happen if we do a survey in five years — the native species may be all gone”.

While Ichihara’s agency has been collecting the foreign fish, Japanese experts worry that the invaders’ agressive breeding habits will thwart any permanent solutions, according to MICRA.

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Mi Ae Lipe-Butterbrot is associate editor of Big River.

Swan Freeze

Monticello, Minnesota — Hundreds of trumpeter swans may be forced to migrate in mid-winter, if normally warm waters freeze over when a power plant shuts down.

Northern States Power’s (NSP) plant at Monticello shut down January 6 for scheduled maintenance, which should take about a month. The site, on the Mississippi upriver from the Twin Cities, is not a natural wintering site for trumpeters, notes Steve Kittelson of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), but a “combination of open water and available food supplies has caused the development of this swan wintering site over the past 12 years.”

Over 400 swans were counted along the Mississippi in the Monticello area this winter. The swans are offspring from stock originally released by Hennepin Parks in the late 1960s and from 270 swans released by the Minnesota DNR in the past dozen years.

The DNR swans sport numbered orange wing tags and federal leg bands. Report sightings of these swans to the DNR at 1-888-MINDNR or email steve.kittelson@dnr.state.mn.us.
**Current Events**

By Mi Ae Lipe-Butterbrodt

**River Theater**

**Minneapolis, Minn.** — The prestigious Guthrie Theater may move to a new Mississippi riverfront home in downtown Minneapolis by 2004. On January 10, the Guthrie’s board approved a future move to a site bounded by Chicago Avenue, West River Parkway and Second Street South. The theater has outgrown the Loring Park area it shares with the Walker Art Center. The cost of the expansion is estimated at $60 to 70 million.

The Guthrie board is seeking legislative support for the new building. So far, the city and Guthrie officials have not negotiated land arrangements. The land was originally pegged for a new stadium for the Minnesota Twins, but the Minneapolis City Council unanimously voted to offer the site to the Guthrie.

**Careful Steps**

**Savanna, Ill.** — Several state and national agencies wonder why the Army permits public access in some areas of the Savanna Army Depot while restricting wildlife research in those same areas because of safety hazards from unexploded ordnance, or UXO.

The Savanna Army Depot encompasses over 13 miles of Mississippi riverfront, large areas of islands and backwaters, and 68 miles of railroad track (see “From Bombs to Prairie Flowers,” Big River, August 1997). When the depot closes in March, the Army will face the monumental task of cleaning up environmental hazards, including UXO.

The Army plans to transfer depot land to other agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The DNR and FWS have chosen three spots that they believe are especially important to clean up and open to the public, which include Primm’s Pond, Batey Creek and a boat landing and bottomlands.

But when the FWS and the DNR sought approval to do wildlife research in these areas last spring, the only places the Army allowed unlimited access to were the roads, because the three spots were contaminated with UXO. Yet the Army allowed more than 140 people to hunt and fish last fall in the potential UXO areas. The Army also plans to open public access to the boat landing and bottom lands.

“Although the Army is applying a double standard with regard to risk,” said Randy Nyboer, regional administrator for the Division of National Heritage of the DNR.

Ed Britton of the FWS asks, “When people can go in there with firearms, why are we restricted to the roads?”

Arlen Dahlman, base transition coordinator for the Army, said the Army restricted but did not prohibit agency access to the off-road areas; the agencies could have asked to do wildlife surveys in any area. But Britton says the FWS was advised in April that “our activities should be limited to those areas outside the UXO. Then, in May, we were restricted in all areas of the depot.”

The restrictions cost the FWS an entire summer of study, according to Britton, and the DNR about $20,000 in grant money.

The Army currently has no plans to clean up a path along the access roads to the proposed public sites, or to fence the roads on both sides. Primm’s Pond and Batey Creek will remain off-limits, but controlling traffic in the bottomlands will be very difficult. Further complicating the matter: the Army and Environmental Protection Agency do not agree on UXO testing standards, and even if the Army finds UXO, it may not have sufficient money to clean it up. Cleanup costs up to $10,000 per acre and up to 6,000 acres may be affected (Dubuque Telegraph Herald 12-28-99).

**Panfished Out**

**Minnesota** — Ice anglers may be catching too many panfish from the Mississippi River, according to a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) study in 1997-1998 on 16 backwaters.

Based on harvest and population estimates, the study found that 84 and 90 percent of bluegill larger than seven inches were harvested from backwaters in Pools 5A and Pool 5, respectively.

In a creel survey, nearly 80 percent of 1,358 anglers said they would support bag limit restrictions if it would improve panfishing. The survey also showed that angling pressure increased nearly 17 percent from the 1997-1998 season to 1998-1999 and that the number of fish caught per hour increased 18 percent. The DNR held public meetings in January to discuss potential regulation changes and how to improve the Mississippi River backwater fishery.

**Fort Snelling B&B**

**St. Paul, Minn.** — Twenty-eight vacant but historic buildings are up for grabs at Fort Snelling.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is seeking new uses for the buildings, which overlook the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers near the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.
Backers of three proposed schools are looking at some of the buildings, but about 380,000 square feet in the remaining buildings are available on the 141-acre Upper Bluff site. The DNR would grant long-term leases on acceptable uses, which might include schools, a conference center, an environmental learning center, government offices, museums, recreational facilities or bed and breakfast lodges.

Anyone interested in the buildings should contact the DNR’s Bill Weir at (651) 772-7994, or Lee Markell at (651) 297-7481 by February 11.

Not Frog Fertilizer

Corvallis, Or. — Levels of nitrates and nitrites that the Environmental Protection Agency deems safe enough for human drinking water can kill some species of frogs and salamanders, according to a new study at Oregon State University.

Scientists found that even very low levels of the nitrogen-based compounds that form and accumulate in runoffs from farms where large amounts of artificial, nitrogen fertilizers are used, resulted in physical deformities and death in tadpoles and young frogs. The study showed that nitrates are not very toxic, but when they are reduced to nitrites, health risks soar.

This study’s confirms that a combination of factors are probably responsible for the recent worldwide decline in amphibians and an increase of frog deformities, including chemical compounds formed from agricultural fertilizers, acid rain and even exposure to ultraviolet light.

Lower than Zero

Missouri and Wisconsin — Water levels continue to be low on the Mississippi River, especially in St. Louis, where one reading reached its lowest in six years.

The gauge at Eads Bridge on January 6 read minus 0.6 feet, more than half a foot below the arbitrary “zero” on the gauge. At this level, the Main Channel was only about 12 feet deep, with the river level 50 feet lower than its record flood crest stage of August 1, 1993.

The low water led the Coast Guard to temporarily limit the size of tows heading downstream from St. Louis (St. Louis Post-Dispatch 1-7-00). Since then, rain and warmer temperatures have elevated the level above zero again, according to The Waterways Journal, (1-10-00).

If the river is low this spring, plans for the Pool 8 drawdown in the Upper Mississippi could be affected. The Army Corps of Engineers has approval to reduce pool levels by 18 inches at Lock and Dam 8 this summer and 6 inches at the La Crosse gauge, with a stipulation that it first dredge some shallow areas.

In April, river managers will decide if this will be a good year for the drawdown, which is scheduled to begin June 15.

Urban Geese

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) invites the public to comment on Canada goose management in a series of meetings in February and March.

Canada geese in urban areas occasionally refuse to migrate, preferring instead to live year-around in public parks built around ponds. As more birds congregate in these areas, their droppings damage lawns and could contaminate municipal water supplies. Potential collisions between geese and commercial aircraft also pose a safety hazard, causing dangerous takeoff and landing conditions and costly repairs.

The FWS hopes to ease conflicts between humans and Canada geese by issuing special permits that allow state wildlife agencies to design management programs and for specific goose populations without having to seek a separate permit for each.

People are encouraged to notify the FWS of their intent to speak at a particular meeting by writing to the Chief, Office of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, ms 634 ARLSQ, 1849 C St., NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.

Written comments should be submitted by March 30, 2000, and can be sent electronically to canada_goose_eis@fws.gov. For the meeting information, see the Calendar in this issue.

Missouri Tows

In a time when the Army Corps of Engineers is under fire for suggesting that locks and dams be expanded to support increased barge traffic on the Mississippi River, some economists question the need for barges on the Missouri River as well.

In a report commissioned by Environmental Defense (formerly the Environmental Defense Fund), agricultural economists Dale Anderson at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Michael Babcock at Kansas State University point out that the Missouri River is too narrow and shallow and has too short a shipping season. The report, “Does Barging on the Missouri River Provide Significant Benefits?,” challenges long-held beliefs that competition from barge traffic holds down railroad freight prices, contrary to arguments from barge terminal operators and farmers.

The report echoes a 1998 report, also commissioned by Environmental Defense, authored by Philip Baumel, an Iowa State University agricultural economist, that also questions the economic logic of barge shipping on the Missouri. Both reports can be ordered or downloaded from the Environmental Defense website (www.edf.org).

DM&E Landlocked

Winona, Minn. — Officials of the Dakota, Minnesota and Eastern Railroad (DM&E) recently lost some credibility when they claimed to have worked out access to Winona’s
Bikers on the River

Davenport, Iowa — Motorcyclists won out over bicyclists in a battle over who could use Davenport's Le Claire Park this Father's Day weekend.

Davenport aldermen voted for "Sturgis on the River," a motorcycle gathering, which they say properly booked the park. Even though Le Claire Park was the marshaling point for the "Ride the River" bicycling event for the past 16 years, Alderman Bill Sherwood says its organizer, River Action, Inc., never formally applied to use the park and never objected to other groups using it until Sturgis held its first rally there last year (Quad-City Times 1-20-00).

Last year, the Sturgis event was held Friday and Saturday, and Ride the River on Sunday. But parking for Sturgis made it difficult for Ride the River participants to pick up their registration packets on Saturday, and piles of trash from Sturgis awaited bicyclists on Sunday, said Kathy Wine, executive director of River Action.

Aldermen hoped the park could accommodate both groups on the same weekend, but the motorcyclists won a seven-to-three vote. Wine says River Action may look elsewhere, perhaps Bettendorf, which has been courting the group.

Bridge Impasse

Stillwater, Minn. — Federal agencies may decide the future of the historic Stillwater lift bridge, since local and state agencies remain at an impasse.

Local, state and national agencies have fought over the Stillwater bridge for years. The National Park Service nixed plans for a new, obstructive, four-lane bridge to replace the deteriorating lift bridge because the Lower St. Croix is a National Scenic Riverway. In 1997, the pre-World War II lift bridge landed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of the 11 most endangered historic places.

Now the department of transportation hopes to offset the effects of the proposed four-lane bridge with a package of solutions, one of which calls for the lift bridge to remain operating for 10 years after the new bridge opens or until it doesn't work.

Local representatives say plans to tear down the lift bridge at a definite time are unacceptable. Nevertheless, transportation officials feel their proposal is a compromise that the Park Service would approve. The new bridge, built south of downtown Stillwater, would likely open in 2004.

Minnesota transportation officials say they will ask the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to settle the issue. The council advises the president and Congress (St. Paul Pioneer Press 1-13-00).

Whose Game?

Wisconsin — The Conservation Congress is out of step with the times, according to State Rep. DuWayne Johnsrud, referring to the furor over an anti-hunting activist elected to it last spring. The congress advises the Department of Natural Resources on outdoor sporting issues.

After Madison animal protectionist Patricia Randolph was elected in Dane County to the congress, the chairman, citing a bylaw, told Randolph she would be either censured or removed from the position if she spoke out against hunting. "Whenever you invoke your affiliation with the Congress," Steve Oestreicher said, "you are required to present and promote the positions of the congress, which are to promote hunting, fishing and trapping."

Randolph retorted that the bylaws also say members have an obligation to represent your country's directions and wishes on all stated resources and environmental issues. And because she was elected by people who are anti-hunting advocates, she is "representative of Wisconsin citizens" (Wisconsin State Journal, 1-11-00).

Johnsrud says this shows how out of touch the congress is with modern trends in natural resources management. He says his request for the Legislative Council to study the congress is not related directly to the Randolph controversy.

Namewise

You may have heard about The Mississippi Riverwise Partnership, a coalition of environmental, conservation and sustainable agriculture groups that is searching for ways to end the "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico. We hope the name does not cause any confusion. Riverwise, Inc., publisher of Big River, is not related to this partnership or involved in its activities.
Special Events & Festivals

February

Weekends through March 26, Eagle Watch, 1 p.m. - 3 p.m., Wabasha, Minn., staffed city deck, (612) 565-4989, (651) 290-1695.

1-6 Winter Carnival, St. Paul, Minn., 1-888-488-4023.

2 Lion’s Ice Fishing Derby, 11 a.m. - 3 p.m., Lake Onalaska, Onalaska, Wis., 1-800-873-1901.

3-6 La Crosse Winter Rec-fest, La Crosse, Wis., (608) 789-7533.

5 Brrry Scurry, Clinton, Iowa, (319) 244-7001.

5-6 Winter Fest, Lake City, Minn., (651) 345-4123.

6 Lion’s Club Fishing Contest, Pepin, Wis., (715) 442-3011.

11-12, 18-19 Maple Syruping, Fort Snelling State Park, St. Paul, Minn., (651) 726-1171.


12 Candlelight Ski/Stroll, 6 p.m. - 9 p.m., Wyalusing State Park, Bagley, Wis., (608) 996-2261.

16-20 Greater Northwest Vacation Show, Minneapolis Convention Center, Minneapolis, Minn., (612) 943-2002.

18-20 Sportsmen Show, Civic Center, St. Cloud, Minn., (612) 755-8111.

18-21 Great Backyard Bird Count, to report use link on Big River website, or call 1-800-326-4928 or 1-800-843-2473.

26 Grumpy Old Men Festival, Wabasha, Minn., 1-800-565-4158.

March


Workshops & Conferences

February

13-17 International Zebra Mussel and Aquatic Nuisance Species Conference, Toronto, Canada, 1-800-986-8776.

16 Profiting From Wildlife Tourism Workshop, 8:30 a.m., St. James Hotel, Red Wing, Minn., $30, register, 1-888-MINNDNR or (651) 296-6157.


March

Almanac

By Kenny Salwey

February is an unusual month. Maybe this is due, in part, to the way it begins — Ground Hog Day! I’m not so sure, in this upper big river country, that a wild ground hog has ever had the slightest notion of sticking its head out of its burrow on the second day of this month. Yet, I’m always watching what the weather is on Ground Hog Day because there are some critters and birds thinking “Spring!” Red foxes, gray foxes, coyotes, squirrels and raccoons are paired up and mating now. Flocks of horned larks are migrating. Late in the month Canada geese begin to do the same. The spring courtship songs of the cardinals and chickadees can be heard by month’s end.

Some February days seem long, with sun, mild temperatures and gentle breezes. Overnight, certain stretches of the big river and heavily currented backwater sloughs free themselves from winter’s icy grip, but it is usually a brief reprieve. The short, gray, windy, snow-filled days of Old Man Winter always seem to be lurking just beyond the horizon.

Mild days and cold days all seem to come and go with the whim of the wind. It is a month of paradoxes and contradictions. Some critters hibernate, others mate. A few birds sing springtime songs and nest while the rest act very “wintry.” February is the shortest month, yet at times it feels like the longest. For me, the only thing certain about February is that for as long as the mighty eagle soars above our big river, I will have one eye fixed upon a ground hog den, the other on the weather and my mind will be thinking spring. Hey, it’s just around the next bend in the river, my friend.